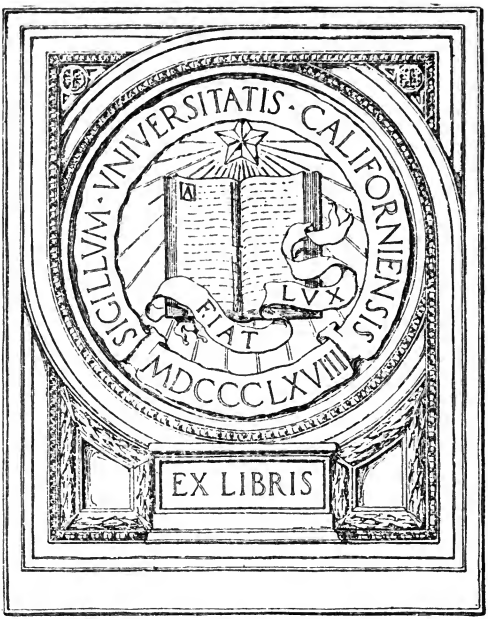
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THE VAGRANT

AND OTHER TALES

BY

VLADÍMIR KOROLÉNKO

Translated from the Russian

BY

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE.

VLADÍMIR KOROLÉNKO was born July, 1853, at Jitómir, in the government of Volýnia. His father, a goverment official, served first as judge, then as district attorney, and later as district judge in the cities of Dúbno and Róvno in the same government, where he died toward the end of the sixties, while Korolénko was still in the Gymnasium.

His mother, a Pole, the daughter of a well-to-do landed proprietor, had died while he was still quite young, leaving six children — four boys and two girls. On the death of the father, the family was left without any means of support, for the judge, a man of high principle, had ever resisted all attempts at bribery, so prevalent in the Russian courts of the period, and had lived strictly on his salary.

In 1870, Korolénko, after having finished his

course in the Róvno Gymnasium, graduated with honor, and entered the Institute of Technology in St. Petersburg. On arriving at the capital, he had just seventeen rubles in his pocket, and for two years he struggled with want and poverty, spending his leisure moments in the fatiguing and unremunerative employment of coloring botanical maps.

During the third year of his course, he removed to Moscow, and entered the Petróvsk Agricultural Academy. In the year 1875, the third year of the course in the academy, he was banished to the government of Vólogda, for participating in a joint address presented by the students of the academy to the faculty; but, on his way thither, he received orders to proceed at once to Kronstadt, where his family resided, and to place himself under the surveillance of the police. When, at the end of a year, this surveillance ceased, he was allowed to remove, with his family, to St. Petersburg, where he remained till 1879. In February of that year, after a twice repeated domiciliary search, Korolénko was arrested, and, together with his brother, his cousin, and

his brother-in-law, banished to Glázof, in the government of Vyátka; thence further north, to Výshne Volótsk, where he was confined in a prison for political convicts.

No explanations whatever were vouchsafed him concerning the proceedings; he simply learned that he was shortly to go to Siberia, probably to a place such as even "Makár never drove his calves to," as the Russian proverb aptly expresses it. It is only recently that he chanced to discover the fact that these punishments were awarded for an escape from prison, which was attributed to him, but which, in reality, he had never attempted.

In 1880, during Korolénko's confinement in the Výshne-Volótsk prison, Lóris-Mélikof sent Prince Iméritínsky to investigate the condition of the political prisoners, and to report to him the causes and circumstances of their incarceration; and when, in the following August, Korolénko had already started with a party for Siberia, his sentence of exile to Yakútsk was rescinded, probably as a result of this investigation, and he was allowed to return to Perm, where he began his literary career.

In 1881, on the coronation of the Emperor Alexander III., he refused to take the oath of allegiance, and, as a consequence of his refusal, was banished to the Yakút district in Siberia; and this time he did not fail to reach his destination. He arrived at Amgee, and there, settling with some of his former comrades, remained three years, occupying himself with agriculture. At the expiration of his term of exile, he returned to Nóvgorod, where most of the members of his family had assembled, and where he lives at the present time.

His first literary sketches had appeared in 1879, and, although his exile somewhat interfered with his work, he still continued to write, as his family, deprived of all its bread-winners, sadly needed the money he could thus earn. Many of his earlier sketches, written at this period, failed to make a lasting impression — a fact which discouraged him, and for a time induced him to abandon further attempts. Yet the scenes through which he had passed during his exile haunted and distressed him, and he often found relief in jotting them down on paper. Some of these were printed in

1885, and at once won for him a place in the ranks of popular Russian authors.

"Makár's Dream," "Sketches of a Siberian Tourist," and "A Saghalinian" are pictures of Siberian life; "In Bad Society" contains a description of South-west Russia, including the city where Korolénko completed his studies. "The Forest Soughs" is a weird and romantic legend of Little Russia, and in "The Blind Musician" he pictures the deep pathos of a blind man's life. Confining himself strictly to the mental sufferings that arise from blindness, he does not allow these to be enhanced by untoward fortune; therefore he places his hero in exceptionally favorable circumstances.

In his tales Korolénko often carries his readers to distant and unknown countries, and describes strange and unfamiliar types; but in his last sketches, of "Prokhór and the Student" and "In the Factory," he leaves his beloved Little Russia and Siberia, and transports us into Central Russia, to the commonplace atmosphere of Moscow.

Korolénko's chief merit is his artistic simplicity. Whether he describes a Siberian

yourt, a prison-cell, or the vagrant Bagyláï, one feels that it is the result of his personal observations, and that his heart goes out in sympathy toward the "unfortunates," with whom it was his fate to spend several years.

THE OLD BELL-RINGER.

A SPRING IDYL.

It was growing dark; over the horizon line, where the tree-tops met the sky, the full moon was rising, giving as yet but little light. . . . The small village nestling beside the distant river was shrouded in the half-light peculiar to spring nights, when the veiled moon hangs pensively above the horizon, and the fog rising from the ground deepens the long shadows in the woods and fills the open spaces with a silvery blue twilight. . . . All was still, pensive, and sad . . . while the village quietly slumbered.

The outlines of the wretched huts were barely visible; a few lights glimmered here and there; at times a gate creaked, or a watchful dog gave an occasional bark. Once in a while the form of some traveller, pedestrian or horseman, would appear against the dark background of the faintly murmuring forest, or a

cart go creaking along. These were the dwellers of the distant wood-lots hastening to their church for the spring holiday. The church stood on a hillock in the centre of the village. Its windows were brightly lighted, while its tall belfry, ancient and dark, was lost in the depths of the blue sky.

One could hear a creaking on the stairs . . . it was the old bell-ringer Mikhéyitch mounting to the belfry, and presently his lantern, like a falling star, seemed to be suspended in space. . . .

It was with difficulty that the old man climbed the steep stairs. His feet refused to serve him; he was worn out, and his eyesight was dim. . . . He ought to have been at rest long ago, but death had passed him by. He had buried his sons and his grandsons, had seen both the old and the young go to their graves, and still he lived on. It was sad to see him. . . . Year after year he had seen the spring holiday, and could not remember the number of times he had waited for the solemn hour in this very belfry. And now once more

it was God's will that he should be there. . . . He went up to the opening in the wall, and leaned on the railing. Around the church, in the darkness below, lay the graves of the village burying-ground, — the old crosses extending their arms above them with an air of protection; a few leafless birches leaned over them, and a fragrant odor of young buds reached Mikhéyitch, bringing with it a sense of the calm melancholy of eternal rest. . . .

In a year hence where will he be? Will he ever climb again to this height, beneath the brass bells, and wake the slumbering night with an echoing peal? or will he lie in some dark corner of the graveyard, under a cross? God knows! . . . He was ready, and, in the meantime, God had granted him once more the happiness of seeing the holiday.

Lifting his eyes to the star-lit sky as he crossed himself, his old lips whispered the familiar formula, "God be praised!"

"Mikhéyitch! — I say, Mikhéyitch!" an old man's voice called out from below; and the hoary-headed subdeacon gazed up at the belfry,

shielding his blinking eyes with his hand, striving in vain to see Mikhéyitch.

"What is it? Here I am," replied the bell-ringer, looking down. "Can't you see me?"

"No, I can't. . . . I think it must be time to begin. What do you say? . . ."

Both turned their eyes upward to the stars. Myriads of God's lights twinkled on high. The fiery Wagoner was already far above the horizon, and Mikhéyitch meditated.

"No, wait a little. . . . I know when to begin. . . ."

Truly he knew, without a clock to guide him; God's stars were his timepiece. . . . The heavens, the earth, the white clouds flitting slowly through the air, the dark forest yonder, with its indistinct murmur, and the rippling of the river shrouded in the darkness, — all was familiar to him. . . . He had not spent his life in vain. . . . The remote past came up before him. . . . He remembered when, with his father, he climbed to this belfry for the first time. . . . Heavens! how long ago that was, and yet how recent it seemed! . . . He remembered himself a fair-haired lad: his eyes sparkled; the wind

—not the wind that raises the dust in the streets, but a peculiar kind, that fans the earth with its noiseless wings — tossed his hair. . . . Below, far, far away, he saw tiny human beings walking about, and the village houses too looked dwarfish; the forest seemed to have receded into the distance, and the oval-shaped meadow, where the village stood, extended, apparently, as far as the eye could reach. . . .

"And can it be no larger than this!" exclaimed the old man, with a smile, as he gazed at the little meadow. It was like his own life. . . . When he was young, he could hardly realize its end . . . And now, behold! it lay, so to speak, in his palm, from the beginning to yonder grave, which he had chosen. . . . Well, thank God! It was time for him to rest. He had honestly borne the burden of the day, and the moist, cool earth seemed like a mother to him. . . . Soon, very soon! . . .

But now the hour has come! Glancing once more at the stars, Mikhéyitch rose, took off his hat, made the sign of the cross, and gathered

up the bell-ropes. . . . A minute later and the night air quivered with the first stroke of the resonant bells. Swiftly they came, stroke after stroke, filling the expectant night with their deep, harmonious voices.

The ringing ceased. Services had begun in church. It had always been his habit to go down and take up his place in the corner, by the door, where he would pray and listen to the singing; but now he remained upstairs. It was not so easy for him to walk as once it was, and he felt a certain weariness. He seated himself on the bench, and, listening to the low vibrations of the music, he fell into a reverie. What was he thinking of? He could hardly have answered the question. . . . The feeble light of his lantern fell on the belfry spire, where the still vibrating bells were lost in the darkness; he could hear the chant from the church below, and the night air gently stirred the ropes that hung from the iron tongues of the bells. The old man's head drooped upon his breast; his brain was alive with confused and wandering fancies. "Now

they are singing the sequence," he thought, and imagined himself in church, where a score of children's voices were singing in the choir; and old Father Nahum, long since dead, intoned the prayers with his quavering voice; hundreds of voices rose and fell, like ripened stalks of grain blown by the wind. . . . The peasants crossed themselves. . . . All these persons were familiar to him, and yet they were all the faces of the departed. . . . Here he beheld the severe outlines of his father's face; there was his older brother standing beside him, earnestly praying and heaving many a sigh. And he himself stood there in the bloom of vigor and strength, filled with vague longings for the happiness and the delights of life. . . . And where was that happiness now? . . . The old man's thoughts were like a flickering flame, illuminating by flashes all the by-ways of his past life. . . . Hard labor, sorrow, care . . . where was the happiness? A hard lot will trace furrows even on a young face, will bow the sturdy frame, and teach a lesson in sighing, even as it had taught the older brother. . . .

There on the left, among the peasant women, humbly bowing her head, lo! there stood his sweetheart. A good woman, may she inherit the kingdom of Heaven! Poor creature, she had suffered much! . . . Poverty, hard work, and the never ending sorrows of a woman's life will wither her beauty, and dim the lustre of her eyes; the proud grace of a maiden succumbs to the unexpected strokes of misfortune, and a look of mute apprehension settles on her face. . . . Again the question, where was her happiness? . . . They had one son, their hope and their joy; but he proved too frail to resist temptation. . . .

And behold his old enemy as, with genuflections, he prayed to be forgiven for the many tears he had brought to orphans' eyes; just then he made a hasty sign of the cross, and, falling on his knees, touched his forehead to the ground . . . while Mikhéyitch's heart boiled within him, and the dark faces of the *ikons* looked sternly from the wall on human grief and human wickedness. . . .

All this is past and left behind. . . . Now his world is bounded by this gloomy watch-

tower, where the wind whistles in the darkness as it stirs the ropes. . . . "May God be your judge!" whispered the old man, and dropped his gray head, while the tears slowly trickled down his cheeks. . . .

"Mikhéyitch! — I say, Mikhéyitch! — are you asleep?" called out a voice from below.

"What is wanted?" answered the old man, rising quickly. Heavens! could he have fallen asleep! — That would have been shameful! Never before had a thing like that happened to him; and with a swift and practised hand he seized the ropes.

The moving mass of peasants, seen from above, looked like a swarming ant-hill. The gold brocade of the church banners sparkled as they fluttered in the air. . . . The procession had made the circuit of the church, and when Mikhéyitch heard the joyous call, "Christ is arisen from the dead!" it found fervent response in the heart of the old man. . . . It seemed to him as if the tapers were burning brighter, and as if the crowd were moving more swiftly; the banners fluttered, and the rising wind wafted the sound of the music up to the heights

beyond, where it blended with the loud, solemn pealing of the bells.

Never before had old Mikhéyitch rung like this! It seemed as though the old man's heart had entered into the inanimate metal, and the voices of the bells alternately sang and laughed and cried, blending in a magnificent concord, that rose to the sky, where the stars shone more and more brilliantly, and then fell trembling through the air, and clung at last to the earth with a loving embrace. . . .

The deep, powerful tones of the bass bell united with the high and joyful tenors proclaiming to Heaven and Earth, "Christ is arisen!"

And the two small soprani, as if in fear of being outstripped, crowded in among the stronger voices, singing like little children, in hurried, gleeful tones, "Christ is arisen!"

And the old belfry seemed to quiver and shake, and the wind waved its mighty wings, repeating, "Christ is arisen!" The aged heart forgot its life, so full of care and sorrow. . . . The old bell-ringer no longer remembered that

for him the scene of life was bounded by a dreary and narrow belfry, that he was alone in the world, like an old stump, broken by the storm. . . . He listened to these sounds of song and praise, that mounted up to heaven and embraced the sorrowful earth, and it seemed to him that he was surrounded by sons and grandsons, that these voices were all his own, both young and old, blending into a single choir, and singing to him of the joy and happiness which he had not tasted in his life. . . . He pulled the ropes, and the tears ran down his cheeks, and his heart beat violently with this dream of happiness. . . .

The people below, as they listened, said one to the other, "Never before has old Mikhéyitch rung so well." . . .

Suddenly the big bell gave forth an uncertain sound, and ceased. . . . The smaller ones, as though abashed, rang one unfinished tone, and they too stopped, and seemed to listen to the mournful echo of the prolonged note which trembled in the air until it died away. . . . The old bell-ringer fell back on

the bench, and the last two tears slowly rolled down his white cheeks. . . .

Ho, there! Send up a substitute! The old bell-ringer has rung his last stroke. . . .

THE FOREST SOUGHS.

A FOREST LEGEND.

"In the days of old Lang Syne!"

THE forest soughed. . . .

The forest always soughed, now with a murmur calm and prolonged, like the echo of distant ringing, and again soft and gentle, like a song without words or a dim memory of the past. It always soughed, for it was an old and mighty forest, still untouched by the saw or the axe of woodman or trader. The tall, centennial pines, with their vast trunks, stood like threatening warriors, and their green tops formed a massive wall. Everything below was still; the air was filled with an odor of resin. Ferns of vivid hues pushed their way through the carpet of pine-needles with which the ground was strewn, expanding luxuriantly and resting thereon, like a soft fringe, without stirring a leaf. In the damp corners the green

grass shot up its tall and slender stems, and the white clover, heavy with bloom, drooped its languid head; while over all soughed the forest, with long-drawn, indistinguishable sighs.

Now the sighs were growing deeper and louder; and as I rode along the forest path, although I could not see the sky, I judged by the moaning of the trees that heavy clouds were slowly rising above it. It was late in the afternoon. Here and there a sunbeam made its way, but in the dense woods the twilight was spreading rapidly. Evidently a storm was brewing.

All plans for hunting must be given up for to-day. The storm might overtake me before I could find shelter for the night. My horse snorted and pricked up his ears, when, striking his hoofs against the naked roots, he heard the sharp sound of the forest echo, and he quickened his pace as he drew near a familiar hut.

A dog barked, and whitewashed walls glimmered through the trees. A bluish ribbon of smoke curled above the overhanging foliage; and the crooked hut, with its shaggy roof, came in sight, nestling against the trunks of the

trees. It seemed as though it grew out of the earth, while the tall, slender pines tossed their heads above it; beyond, in the middle of the clearing, rose a clump of young oaks, clustering together.

Here lived the constant companions of my hunting expeditions, the forest guards, Maxím and Zakhár, who were evidently not at home, since the barking of the large shepherd dog brought no one to meet me. The grandfather, with his bald head and long beard, sat alone on the bench making bast shoes. His beard reached almost to his waist, and his eyes looked dim, as though he were vainly trying to recollect something.

"Hallo, grandfather! Is any one at home?"

"Ehé!" * muttered the old man, shaking his head; "neither Zakhár nor Maxím is in, and Mótrya has also gone into the woods to fetch the cow . . . for she has strayed away . . . may be the bears have got her. . . . So, you see, no one is at home."

"Never mind; I will wait and keep you company."

* An exclamation common in Little Russia.

"That's right," he replied, nodding, and, as I fastened my horse to an oak branch, he peered at me with his bleared eyes. The old man was getting feeble. He could scarcely see, and his hands shook.

"And who may you be, my lad?" he asked, when I joined him on the bench.

He asked the same question every time I came.

"Ehé! I know now," he said, as he resumed his work. "My head is like an old sieve; it holds nothing. Those who are long since dead I remember very well, — but I forget the younger people. . . . The fact is, I have lived too long."

"And how long have you lived in this forest, grandfather?"

"A long time! I was living here when the Frenchman invaded the land of the Tsar."

"You must have seen a good deal in your lifetime; you could relate many a tale."

The old man looked up in surprise.

"What could I see, my lad? The forest. . . . The forest soughs night and day, summer and winter, and I, like that tree yonder, have

spent my life in these woods, and have never had a chance to see. . . . It is time to die, and sometimes, when I try to think, I cannot understand clearly whether or no I *have* lived in this world. . . . Ehé ! So it goes ! It may be that I have not lived. . . ."

The edge of the dark cloud appeared above the high tree-tops of the clearing. The branches of the pines which encircled it swayed, as they were blown by the wind, and a prolonged murmur passed like a crescendo chord. The grandfather raised his head and listened.

"The storm is coming nearer," he remarked a moment later. "I know it. What a battle there will be to-night ! It will break down the pines and uproot them. . . . The Spirit of the Forest will have full sway, . . ." he added, in an undertone.

"What makes you think so, grandfather ? "

"Ehé ! I am sure of it ! I know the language of the trees. . . . They too are afraid, my lad. . . . The aspen is a cursed tree ; always whispering ; it shakes when there is no wind. When the day is fair, the pine

sings at its play; let the wind rise, and it begins to sough and moan. But this is nothing. Hark! Though my eyes are dim, my ears are still good. I can hear the oaks stirring on the clearing. . . . That is a sign of a storm."

And, in fact, the group of sturdy oaks standing in the middle of the meadow, protected by the woods as by a wall, waved their strong branches, rustling loudly, with a sound unlike the murmuring of the pines.

"Ehé! Don't you hear it, my lad?" said the grandfather, smiling in his innocent, childlike way. "I know what it means when the oaks rustle. The Master of the Forest will come at night and make sad havoc. . . . But even *he* cannot break them! The oak is a strong tree; the Master himself cannot break it. . . . That is the truth!"

"What do you mean by the Master, grandfather? You said, just now, it was the storm that broke them."

The old man nodded with a knowing air.

"Ehé! I know something. . . . The world is full of people nowadays who believe in noth-

ing. That is the trouble. But I have seen him as I see you now, and perhaps even better; for now my eyes are dim, but in my young days, I tell you, they were keen!"

"I wish you would tell me how you saw him, grandfather."

"It was a day very like this: the pines began to moan. . . . Generally they murmur, but before a storm they always moan . . . ooo . . . ooo . . . then silence for a while . . . and then again the moaning, faster and faster and more pitiful. Ehé! That's because they know the Master means to lay many of them low in the night. Later the oaks begin to murmur, louder and louder, and by night comes the havoc; the Master runs to and fro, laughs and cries, whirls and dances, trying to uproot the oaks. . . . Once, in the autumn, I spied him from the window. That angered him; running up to the window, he gave it a blow with a branch, that came very near disfiguring me, may the Evil One take him! But I am not a fool; I jumped back! Ehé, my lad, he is a cross one!"

"What does he look like?"

"He looks like an old, dried-up willow in the swamp. Very much like one! . . . His hair is like the mistletoe, that grows on trees, and his beard the same . . . his nose is like a big twig . . . and his face is covered with pimples. Fu! what a fright he is! Heaven preserve any Christian from looking like him, to be sure! Another time I was very near him in the swamp. . . . If you come here in winter, you may see him yourself. Go up that hill, the wooded one, and climb to the top of the highest tree. You may see him from there some day. . . . He soars like a white cloud above the trees, whirling as he descends from the hill into the woods. . . . He travels rapidly and vanishes in the forest! Ehé! And wherever he passes he leaves a white trail. If you don't believe me, you may see for yourself some time."

The old man had grown garrulous. It seemed as though the restless murmur of the forest and the impending storm had stirred his old blood. He nodded, smiling and blinking at me with his faded eyes.

But suddenly a shadow darkened his high,

wrinkled forehead, and, nudging me with his elbow, he said in a mysterious way:—

"I tell you what, my lad! . . . to be sure, the Master of the Forest is an uncanny creature, and a Christian had better keep out of his sight, — but it must be acknowledged he does no great harm. . . . He may play a prank or two, but he will not really hurt a body."

"I thought you said just now, grandfather, that he was about to strike you with a branch?"

"Well, he did intend to! But what of that? He was angry then, because I was looking at him; that was the trouble. But if a body minds his own business, he will not harm him. That is the nature of the Forest Spirit!"

The grandfather hung his head in silence. But when he looked up, a spark of awakening memory seemed to gleam in his dim eyes.

"I will tell you a true story about our forest, my lad. . . . Something happened here, on this very spot, a long time ago. . . . I remember it mostly as a dream . . . but when the forest

soughs it comes back to me distinctly. . . . Shall I tell it to you?"

"Pray, do so!"

"Very well, then. Listen."

II.

"My father and mother died when I was but a young lad . . . leaving me alone in the world. That's how I fared! So the village society had to consider the business, 'What is to be done with the boy?' Our master also thought the matter over. . . . Just then the forester Román, who happened to come from the woods, said to the society: 'Give this lad to me . . . I will take care of him. It will make it more cheerful for me, and I will bear the burden of his support.' That is what he said, and the society gave its consent. So he took me, and I have lived in the forest ever since. And so Román brought me up. What an imposing man he was, Heaven save us! Tall, black-eyed, and black-haired, and a gloomy soul seemed to look out from his eyes . . . for he had lived all his life alone in the woods:

it was said of him that the bear was his brother and the wolf his nephew. He knew all the beasts, and feared none; but he kept shy of people, and rarely looked at them. . . . He was that kind of a man. Whenever he glanced at me, I felt the cold shivers running up my back. Yet he was a kind man, I must say, and he fed me well. There was always plenty of lard in his buckwheat gruel, and when he happened to kill a duck we ate it. I must admit he fed me well. . . .

"And so we lived on together. Whenever Román went into the woods, he used to lock me up in the hut, that the wild beasts might not get me. And after a while he took a wife, Oxanna.

"The master gave him his wife. One day he summoned him and said: 'You must marry, Román!' But Román said to him: 'What the deuce should I want to marry for? What shall I do with a woman in the woods? I don't want to marry.' He was not used to women, you see. But the master was a cunning one. . . . As I think of him now, my lad, I must acknowledge there are none such at present,

. . . they have all died out. . . . Now, I have been told that you are a nobleman. . . . That may be, and yet there is something you lack. . . . You look like any ordinary lad. . . .

"But he was a genuine one, after the old fashion. It often happens in this world that thousands of people stand in awe of a single man . . . deeply in awe. Look at the vulture and the chicken as they come out of the shell. The vulture at once tries to soar; and when he utters his cry, not only chickens but old roosters are frightened. . . . So one might say that the vulture was a noble bird, and the hen a low-born one. . . .

"I remember, when I was a small boy, I used to see the peasants carting heavy timber, maybe some thirty of them. And the master perhaps riding out alone, on horseback, twirling his whiskers as he rode along; his horse capering, and he gazing around. And when the peasants caught sight of him, such a rush as there would be! The horses turned out into the snow, and all hats came off. Then, after he had passed, what hard work it was to pull the timber out! — while he would go galloping

along, as though the road were too narrow even for him alone! If he frowned, the peasants trembled; if he laughed, they brightened up; when he seemed sad, they felt depressed; and I never heard of any one daring to contradict him.

"But, of course, Román had grown up in the woods, and had no fine manners, and the master made allowance for that. 'I want you to marry,' he said; 'and as to the reason, that is my business. You must marry Oxanna.'

"'I don't want her,' replied Román; 'I will not have even Oxanna! Let the devil marry her! I will not! . . .' That's the way he talked.

"The master ordered them to bring the knout. They stretched Román out, and then the master asked him once more: —

"'Will you marry, Román?'

"'No, I will not,' he said.

"'Let him have it, then,' says the master; 'as many lashes as he can stand.'

"So they gave it to him; and although Román was a robust fellow, soon he had enough.

"'That will do,' he said at last, 'that will do! May all the devils take her before I will suffer so for a woman. Bring her here, and I will marry her!'

"A huntsman, Opanás Shvídki by name, was then living at the master's house. He had just returned from the fields at the time when they were persuading Román to marry. When he was told about Román's trials, he dropped on his knees before the master, embracing his feet. . . .

"'If you will allow me, gracious master, I will gladly marry Oxanna, and you need no longer punish this man.' That's the way it was; he was willing to marry Oxanna. . . . That's the kind of a man he was!

"So Román cheered up; and, as he rose to his feet, he said: 'That's a good idea; only, why couldn't you have made your appearance sooner? And the master, I must say . . . he is always hasty. Instead of finding out who would like to marry Oxanna, he got hold of me, and I had to be the scape-goat! I don't call that Christian-like.' You see, sometimes, he did not even spare the master himself. He

was that kind of a man! When he was angry, it was better for everybody to keep out of his way, even for the master himself. But the master was a 'cute one! He had something else in his mind, and again he ordered Román to be laid upon the grass.

"'I wish your happiness, you fool,' he said, 'and you are turning up your nose at it. Now you live alone, like a bear in his den, and it is not cheering to call on you. Let him have it, the fool, until he cries, "Enough." And you, Opanás, go to the deuce; — you were not called to dinner,' he said, 'so don't sit down to the table uninvited! You see how Román is faring? you had better look out lest you get the same.'

"Now Román was becoming angry in good earnest. He was whipped soundly, for in those times the servants knew how to peel the skin off with the knout, — yet there he lay and would not cry, 'Enough.' He bore it for a long time; finally, when he could endure it no longer: —

"'Enough!' he cried, — 'her father shall not have the satisfaction of knowing that a Christian

was thus whipped for a woman's sake! They don't even count the blows! May your hands dry up, you rascally serfs! The devil must have taught you this business! But I am not a sheep, to be thus flayed! If that is the way I am to be treated, I will marry her to spite all!' . . .

"The master laughed. . . .

"'That's all right! Now, although you will be unable to sit at the wedding, you can dance all the more!'

"He was a jolly man, our master. But afterwards a mischance befell him, that I would not wish for any Christian. That's a fact! — I would not wish it even for a Jew!

"So Román was married. He brought his young wife to his hut, and at first did nothing but scold and upbraid her for the whipping he had received.

"'You are not worthy that a man should be thus tormented for your sake,' he said.

"As soon as he returned from the woods, he would drive her out of the hut, saying: —

"'Get out! I don't want any woman in my hut! And never let me see you again. I do

not like to have a woman sleeping in my hut. It poisons the air!'

"But after a while he became reconciled, for Oxanna cleaned the hut, put things in order, polished the kitchen utensils, and gave a cheerful air to everything. And Román saw that she was an industrious woman, and by degrees he grew used to her presence. And not only did he become used to her, but he loved her, — that is the truth of the matter. And when this came to pass, he said: 'Thanks to the master for having taught me where my happiness lay. I was not a wise man, to take so many lashes, for now I see that marrying is not bad; on the contrary, it is a good thing!'

"One evening, some time after this, I cannot tell exactly how long, Oxanna was taken ill, and when I woke up the next morning, I heard some one squealing.

"'Ehé!' I thought to myself, 'it must be that a child is born'; and so it was.

"But it did not live long, — only from morning till night, when it stopped squealing. Oxanna cried, and Román said: 'Now that the child is dead, there is no longer any need

to call the priest. We will bury it under a pine-tree.'

"So saying, he dug the grave and buried the child. Yonder, where the old stump stands that was struck by lightning . . . that is the identical pine under which Román buried the child. And what is more, I will tell you, my lad, sometimes after sunset, and when the stars are shining, a little bird flies overhead and cries, — so pitifully it cries, it grieves one to the heart. That is the unbaptized soul begging for baptism. If a man were clever enough and had book-wisdom, he, they say, could consecrate it, and it would fly no more. . . . But we here in the woods, we know nothing. It flies and beseeches, and we only say, 'We cannot help thee, poor soul.' So it keeps on crying, sometimes flying away and returning again. I pity the poor soul, my lad.

"After Oxanna had recovered, she went often to the grave, and would sit and cry so loud that one could hear her in the woods. She was mourning for her child; but Román was not sorry for the child, — he pitied Oxanna. When he came from the woods, he would stand beside

her and say: 'Keep quiet, you foolish woman! As if you had any cause for crying! If this child is dead, we may have another, for this one may not have been mine! — how can I tell?' Oxanna did not like to hear him speak thus. She stopped crying and began to scold him; but Román was never angry with her.

"'And why do you scold me?' he would say; 'I have not accused you. I only said I did not know. It is true I do not know, for you were not always mine, and did not live in the woods, but in the world, among people. How am I to know? Now you are living in the woods, and that's well. But you had better stop crying, or else I shall get angry, and may give you a beating.'

"Then Oxanna would stop. For, although she sometimes scolded him, and even struck him on his back, yet, when Román himself began to get angry, she subsided. . . . For she was afraid of him. She would caress and kiss him and gaze into his eyes. . . . And thus she pacified him. Because, don't you know, my lad . . . perhaps you don't know, but I, who am an old man and was never married, I have

seen much in my life, and I can tell you a young woman's kiss is very sweet, and she can get the better of any man, no matter how cross he may be. I know what these women are. And Oxanna was a fine-looking woman; I don't see any like her in these days. No, my lad, the women are not what they used to be in my time.

"One day the horn sounded through the woods, ra-ta-ta-ta-ta . . . it rang cheerful and clear. I was then only a small boy, and did not know what it was. I saw the birds rise, flapping their wings and screaming as they flew, and a rabbit here and there, with ears laid back, running with all his might. Where upon I thought, 'It may be some unknown animal that makes this strange sound.' It proved, however, to be no animal, but the master himself, on horseback, riding through the woods, blowing the horn; and following him rode his huntsmen, leading the dogs in leash. And the handsomest of all was Opanás Shvídki, who rode close to the master, in a blue coat, and a hat with a gilt crown; his steed pranced and capered, his rifle shone, and he wore a ban-

dura * slung across his shoulder. The master liked Opanás because he could play and sing well. And a fine-looking man he was indeed. The master made but a poor figure by his side, for he was growing bald and had a red nose; and though his eyes were still bright, they were not to be compared to those of Opanás. When Opanás glanced at me, small lad as I was, I smiled with delight, and I was not a woman. It was rumored that his ancestors were Zaporóg Cossacks, who had been great warriors, and were always renowned for their beauty and vigor.

"And you may imagine flying like a bird on horseback, armed with a spear, is quite a different matter from felling trees with an axe! . . . As I ran out, behold! our master, with his huntsmen, rode up, and stopped in front of the hut. Román came out, and, bowing, held the stirrup for him to dismount.

"'How do you do, Román?' said the master.

"'I am very well, thank you; what should ail me? And how are you?'

"You see, Román did not even know how to

* A musical instrument resembling a lute. — Tr.

answer respectfully. His reply made them all laugh; even the master himself could not help smiling.

"'Thank Heaven that you are well,' he rejoined. 'And where is your wife?'

"'Where should she be but in the hut, to be sure . . . ?'

"'Then, we will go in there, also,' said the master; 'and you boys, meanwhile, spread a rug on the grass, and prepare things for us wherewith to congratulate the newly married couple.'

"So they entered the hut, the master and Román, followed by Opanás, with his hat off, and Bogdán, an old hunter and faithful servant. And here I will say that such servants are no longer to be found. He was an old man, very strict with the other servants, and as faithful to the master as that dog. Bogdán had no relations whatever. It was said that when his father and mother died he wanted to become a laboring peasant, and to marry. But the old master would not give his consent. He placed him in charge of his young son: 'There is your father, your mother, and

your wife,' he said; and so Bogdán began his life's work, taught the boy to ride a horse and to handle a musket. And when the lad grew up, and became master himself, old Bogdán still followed him about like a dog. If truth must be told, Bogdán was often cursed; many a tear had been shed for which he was responsible, and all on account of the master. For he was capable of destroying his own father at a word from his master.

"And I too, small lad as I was, followed them into the hut. Of course, I was curious; and wherever the master went I followed him. I found him standing in the middle of the room, stroking his moustache; and Román was there too.

"And as he stood there, smiling and stroking his moustache, Román, also, stood fumbling with his cap and shuffling his feet, while poor Opanás was leaning against the wall, looking as gloomy as a young oak in a tempest. All three were gazing at Oxanna. Old Bogdán, alone, was seated in the corner, on a bench, with bowed head, waiting for the master's next order, while Oxanna stood in the corner, with

downcast eyes, looking as flushed as yonder poppy in the oats. She could not help feeling that some harm would come to pass, and on her account. And mark my words, lad, whenever three men are in love with the same woman, mischief will surely be the outcome. I know it is so, for I have seen it many a time.

"'Well, Román,' cried the master, in a joking way, 'haven't I given you a nice wife?'

"'Well,' replied Román, 'a woman, like any other. She'll do.' Opanás shrugged his shoulders, and, glancing at Oxanna, said, in an undertone: —

"'A woman, indeed! She might have fallen to the lot of a wiser man.'

"Román, overhearing these words, turned to Opanás, and said: —

"'What is it that makes you think me unwise, master Opanás?'

"'Because you do not know how to protect your wife; that's why you are unwise.'

"And that was Opanás' reply. Whereupon the master stamped his foot, and Bogdán shook his head. Román, having reflected awhile, looked up at the master, and as he did so he

said to Opanás, without, however, removing his eyes from the former: —

"'Against what am I to protect her? We see no one here but wild beasts, unless it may be that the gracious master looks in upon us occasionally. Who is there to guard against? You had better not irritate me, you unfriendly Cossack; if you do, I shall quarrel with you.'

"And he might have carried out his threat had not the master interfered. He stamped his foot, and both subsided.

"'Keep quiet! We have not come here to witness a brawl! We must congratulate the newly married couple, and then, towards night, we will start on our hunt. Follow me!' and, turning, he left the hut.

"Meanwhile the hunters had spread a lunch under the trees. Bogdán followed his master, but in the entry Opanás held Román, and said to him: —

"'Bear me no ill-will, my dear fellow, but think seriously of what Opanás tells you. It is true you saw me on my knees before him, kissing his boots, and begging him to let Oxanna marry me; but peace be with you, man.

. . . You were married to her, and such is fate! Yet I cannot remain passive, and see the evil one insult you both. Ah, no one knows how I feel! . . . I had better send him to mother earth with my rifle!'

"Román looked at the Cossack, and said, —

"'Are you sane?'

"I could not hear what reply Opanás made; I only heard Román slap him on the shoulder, exclaiming: —

" 'Ah, Opanás, what wicked, cunning people there are in this world! And, living in the forest as I do, I knew nothing about them. Well, master, matters may go ill with you!'

"'Go your way now, and, above all, don't let Bogdán get wind of anything. He is a sly dog, and you are far from shrewd. Beware of drinking much of the master's liquor; and, if he sends you with the hunters into the swamps, and orders you to remain there, lead them to the old oak and show them the road that skirts the swamp, telling them, meanwhile, that you will take the short cut through the woods. . . . Then return here as quickly as you can.'

"'All right,' replied Román; 'I will make ready for the hunt, and I will load my gun, not with grape-shot, but with a good-sized bullet, as if I were going on a bear-hunt. . . .'

"Thus they parted. Meanwhile, the master, seating himself on a rug, ordered a flask and a cup to be brought to him, and, having poured some liquor into the cup, he offered it to Román. The master's flask and cup were fine, but his liquor was still finer. The first cup made you feel comfortable, at the second your heart began to throb, and, if a man chanced to be unused to liquor, after the third he might be found under the settle, unless his wife took care to help him on to it.

"The master was a cunning fellow, I can tell you. He wanted to fill Román with liquor and intoxicate him, but no liquor was ever made that could get the better of Román. He drank the three cups to which the master treated him, one after the other, but his eyes merely sparkled, like those of a wolf, and his black whiskers twitched. At last the master grew provoked with him.

"'See the amount of liquor this rascal can

swallow and not show it in the least. Another one in his place would have been shedding tears long ago, and just look at him, my good people! — he only smiles!'

"For the master, fiend that he was, knew very well that when a man begins to weep from the effects of liquor, he will shortly collapse entirely. But he had the wrong man this time.

"'And why should I shed tears?' replied Román. 'That would be quite unsuitable, for has not the gracious master come to congratulate me? And why should I cry like a woman? Thank Heaven, I have no reason to cry. Leave that to my enemies. . . .'

"'Then, you are pleased?' asked the master.

"'And why should I be displeased?'

"'Have you forgotten that we celebrated your betrothal by whipping you?'

"'Certainly not. That's why I say that I was not a wise man, nor did I know the difference between bitter and sweet. Bitter the lash, but I preferred it to a woman. But now I am grateful to you, gracious master, that you gave me, simpleton that I was, a taste for honey.'

"'You are most welcome,' said the master, 'and now it is your turn to do me a favor; when you go with the hunters into the field, shoot as many birds as you can, and be sure and get me a woodcock.'

"'And when is the master going to send us into the swamp?' asked Román.

"'We will start just as soon as we have taken another drink and Opanás has given us a song.'

"Román looked up at the sky and said: —

"'That will be rather a difficult matter, for it is growing late and the swamp is far away; — besides, the wind is rising, and forbodes a storm during the night. As to the woodcock, how can such a shy bird be killed?'

"But the master was already under the influence of the liquor, and in that condition he was apt to be cross. His men were whispering among themselves, and when he overheard them say, 'Román is right, a storm is brewing,' he grew angry. With flashing eyes, he set his cup down with a crash, and all became silent.

"Opanás alone was not frightened. At the

word of command he stepped forward, prepared to accompany his song on a bandura, and, while tuning it, he looked askance at the master, saying: —

"'You had better change your mind, gracious master! Who ever heard of sending people out in the night, when a storm was coming on, to hunt birds in the woods.'

"Opanás was a bold man. The others, being serfs, were afraid of the master; but he was a free man, a Cossack by birth. An old bandura player from the Ukraina, himself a Cossack, had brought him here. There had been a revolt, and the old man, having had his eyes put out and his ears chopped, was allowed to escape, and, wandering through cities and villages, finally came our way with Opanás, who was then a lad and was travelling with him. The old master, fond of good singing, took him into his house, and, after his death, Opanás continued to live there until he grew to be a man. The young master was also fond of him, and bore from him many a speech that would have cost another man his life.

"'Ah! you are a clever fellow, Opanás, but

you seem not to know that when a man puts his nose into the crack of a door it runs the risk of being hurt.'

"That's the conundrum he gave to Opanás. But the Cossack guessed it at once, and answered the master with a song, which, had it been as readily understood, would have spared his lady many a tear.

"'Thank you, master, for the information,' replied Opanás, 'and now I will sing you a song. Hearken!'

"And he struck his bandura.

"Lifting his head, he glanced at the sky, where the eagle soars and the wind drives the clouds; straining his eyes, he seemed to listen to the rustle of the tall pines. . . .

"And then once more he struck his bandura.

"It is a pity, my lad, that you never heard Opanás Shvídki play! Now he is no longer to be heard! What a simple thing a bandura is, to be sure, and yet how well it can talk when touched by a skilful player. He used to strike a few chords, and they seemed to tell him many things: how the dark forest groans at night; how the wind whistles on the steppes, through

the tall grass; and how a withered blade of grass whispers over a Cossack grave.

"No, my lad, you will never hear genuine playing! There are plenty of wandering musicians, and some among them have visited other countries beside Russia, and have travelled throughout the Ukraina; and also in Tchighirín, Poltáva, Kíev, and Tcherkássy. They say that bandura-players are growing scarce; that they are no longer to be found at fairs. I have an old bandura hanging up on the wall in the hut. Opanás taught me to play on it, but there is no one to play it after me; and when I die, and that may be soon, perhaps nowhere in the wide world will one be found to play the bandura. That's the way things are! Opanás had a rich, melancholy voice, whose soft tones touched the heart. And as for the song, my lad, he must have composed it for this special occasion; for when, in after years, I used to tease him to sing it, he always refused . . . and I never heard it again.

"'The man for whom I sang that song is no longer living,' he would say.

"In the song he prophesied, as it were, telling the master what was to befall him; who, though

the tears trickled down his moustache, seemed not to understand his meaning. I am sorry I can only remember a few lines of it. The Cossack sang about one master Iván: —

"'Beware, O master Iván!
Wise art thou, master, and great is thy wisdom!
Thou knowest that the vulture sails through the sky and triumphs over the raven.

"'Beware, O master Iván!
Thou takest no heed that often it chances
In this world
That the raven who defends the nest may triumph over the vulture. . . .'

"I seem still to hear that song and to see the people: the Cossack with his bandura; the master seated on the rug, his head bowed down, sobbing, — the servants around him, making signs to one another; and old Bogdán shaking his head . . . and the forest soughing as it does now; gently and sadly sounded the bandura as the Cossack sang of the Lady mourning over her Lord, master Iván.

"'The Lady weeps,
While the black raven is croaking over master Iván.'

"But the master saw no meaning for himself in the song; wiping his eyes, he exclaimed: —

"'Now, get ready, Román! Mount your horses, boys! And you, Opanás, go with them; I have had enough of your songs! . . . It was a good one, only the things which happen in your songs don't come to pass in this world. . . .'

"But the Cossack's heart had grown pitiful, and tears stood in his eyes.

"'Ah, master,' said Opanás, 'I have heard old people say: there is truth both in song and tale. Only in the tale, truth is like unto iron: passed from hand to hand until it has grown rusty. . . . Whereas in the song it is like gold, which rust cannot corrode. . . . That's what I have heard old people say!'

"The master waved his hand.

"'That may be true in your country; with us it is different. . . . Go, Opanás; I have had enough of you.'

"The Cossack, pausing, suddenly fell on his knees at the master's feet.

"'Listen to me, master, I entreat you. Ride straightway home to your lady! My heart forbodes evil!'

"Then the master grew angry in good

earnest, and, kicking Opanás, as though he were a dog: —

"'Leave me,' he cried; 'you are more like a woman than a Cossack! Take yourself off out of my sight, else it will be the worse for you! And what are you gaping at, you tribe of Ham? Am I no longer your master? I will teach you better manners, after a fashion such as my fathers never used with yours. . . .'

"Opanás rose to his feet, looking like a dark cloud; and he and Román glanced at each other significantly. The latter was standing aloof, leaning on his rifle, apparently quite unconcerned.

"Then the Cossack hurled his bandura against a tree; it flew in pieces, while a moaning sound issued from it, echoing through the forest.

"'Let the devil teach such a man in the next world, since he will not listen to wisdom. . . . It seems you no longer need a faithful servant.'

"Giving the master no time to reply, Opanás threw himself into his saddle and rode away. The hunters mounted; and Román, shouldering his rifle, also started along. As he passed the hut, he called out to Oxanna: —

"'Put the boy to bed, Oxanna! It is time he were sleeping; and prepare a bed for the master too.'

"Soon after, they all left, taking yonder road; the master went into the hut, and his horse alone remained fastened to a tree. It was growing dark, the forest was soughing, and it had begun to rain, just as it does now. . . . Oxanna put me to bed in the hay-loft, and as she blessed me I could hear her crying.

"Well, I was a small chap then, and did not understand what was going on around me. I curled up on the hay, listening to the moaning of the storm in the woods, and was just on the point of dropping off to sleep when, ekh! suddenly I heard footsteps near the hut. . . . Some one came up to the tree and unfastened the master's horse. I heard him snort as he made for the woods, and in a few moments the clatter of his hoofs died away in the distance. . . . Then I heard some one come galloping along the road, and ride up to the hut. Reaching it, he dismounted and ran up close to the window.

"'Master! master!' called out Bogdán's

voice, 'open the door quickly! The fiendish Cossack has plotted against you. He has let your horse loose in the woods!'

"Hardly were the words out of the old man's mouth when somebody seized him from behind. I was scared when I heard the sound of one falling. . . .

"When the master opened the door, and rushed out with his rifle, Román seized him in the vestibule, and threw him on the ground. . . . Realizing his danger, he cried: —

"'Let me go, Román! Is that the way you remember my kindness?'

"And Román replied: —

"'I do remember your kindness, fiend that you are, both toward myself and my wife, and you are going to get your pay for it now! . . .'

"And I heard the master's voice saying: —

"'Defend me, Opanás, my faithful servant. Haven't I loved you like my own son? . . .'

"And Opanás replying: —

"'You spurned your faithful servant as you would a dog. You loved me with the love a stick feels for the back, and now you love

me as the back loves the stick. . . . I have implored and entreated you, but you would not listen to me. . . .'

"Then the master turned to Oxanna.

"'Intercede for me, Oxanna; you have a kind heart.'

"Oxanna ran out of the hut, throwing up her hands as she cried: —

"'I entreated you on my knees to have pity on my innocence, and not disgrace me as a wife, and you refused; now you ask me . . . I am a poor, unhappy woman; what can I do!'

"'Let me go,' cried the master; 'you will all be sent to Siberia for this business! . . .'

"'Don't trouble yourself on our account, master,' replied Opanás; 'Román will be in the swamp before your men get there, and as for myself, I am alone in this world, thanks to you, and I do not care what becomes of me. I shall shoulder my rifle and take to the woods. . . . I shall gather a band of active followers, and we will enjoy life. . . . Sometimes we may leave the forest and appear on the highway by night, and whenever we come to a village we shall always aim for the owner's mansion.

Here, Román, lend a hand, and let us carry our gracious master out into the rain.'

"In vain the master struggled and cried aloud; Román only muttered, while the Cossack jeered at him. And thus they left the hut.

"I was much frightened, and ran back to Oxanna. I found her, as white as a sheet, sitting on the bench. . . .

"Meanwhile, the storm had burst forth in the woods in real earnest. The uproar was like the shouting of a thousand voices; — the wind howled, the thunder crashed. As Oxanna and I sat on the *Lyézhánka*,* we suddenly heard some one moan in the forest. And such a pitiful sound as it was! It makes my heart heavy whenever I think of it, in spite of the years that have passed. . . .

"'Oxanna, darling,' I said, 'who is it moaning in the woods?'

"She took me in her arms and rocked me.

"'Go to sleep, my boy, it is nothing. . . . It is the forest soughing. . . .'

"And, truly, the forest did sough; oh, how

* The low part of the stove, built out to lie upon. — TR.

it soughed! Thus we sat for some time, when I heard the report of a shot.

"'Oxanna, darling,' I said, 'who is it shooting?'

"But she, poor thing, went on rocking me, repeating: —

"'Keep quiet, my boy! . . . it is thundering in the woods. . . .'

"She was crying, as she hugged and rocked me: —

"'The forest soughs, the forest soughs, my boy. . . .'

"And I dropped to sleep in her arms. . . .

"In the morning, when I woke, my lad, and saw the sun shining, and Oxanna sleeping alone in the hut, with her clothes on, I recollected the events of the previous day, and thought it must have been a dream.

"It had been no dream, however, but reality. I ran out of the hut, into the wood, where the birds were singing and the dew glittering on the leaves; and when I reached the bushes, I saw the master and his servant lying side by side, — the master calm and pale, and the gray-haired servant looking as stern as though he

were alive. Their breasts were stained with blood. . . ."

"And what became of the others?" I asked, when the grandfather, having ceased to speak, sat with drooping head.

"Ehé! Everything happened as the Cossack Opanás had promised. For many years he lived in the forest, infesting the highways with his band. That was his destiny: his ancestors had been highwaymen, and it came natural to him to follow their calling. He often came to us, into this very hut, but for the most part at times when Román was away. He would come and sing a song and play on the bandura. Sometimes he brought his comrades — and Oxanna and Román always welcomed him. I must admit, my lad, that things were not as they should be. When Maxím and Zakhár return from the woods, take a look at them. I have never given them a hint, but whoever knew Román and Opanás could see at once which of the two each of them resembles, although they are not the children, but only grandchildren, of those men. . . . And now you know what I

have seen in the forest in my lifetime, my lad. . . .

"Hark! how the forest soughs; . . . the storm is drawing nearer. . . ."

III.

The old man's voice sounded tired as he finished his story. The excitement ended, his fatigue became evident; his speech grew indistinct, his voice shook, and his eyes watered.

The shades of night had enveloped the earth, and the forest looked dark. The trees surrounding the hut swayed to and fro, heaving like the billows of an angry sea; their dark summits might well be likened to the waves in a storm. The joyful bark of the dog announced the return of his masters. The woodmen hurriedly drew near, closely followed by the panting Mótrya, who had found the missing cow. Our company was complete.

Some minutes later we were all seated in the hut, where a bright fire was burning, while Mótrya prepared the supper. Although I had often seen Zakhár and Maxím, I looked at them

now with a new interest. Zakhár's skin was dark; his eyebrows met beneath a low forehead; his eyes looked stern, although one could discern in his expression a certain good-nature, the not uncommon adjunct of great strength. Maxím, on the contrary, showed an open countenance, with caressing gray eyes. He had a trick of shaking his curls, and the sound of his laughter was irresistibly contagious.

"I suppose the old man has been telling you his favorite story about our grandfather," said Maxím.

"Yes; he has," I replied.

"That's what he always does! Whenever the forest soughs louder than usual, his mind goes back to the past, and now, I suppose, he will lie awake all night long."

"He is just like a child," remarked Mótrya, as she poured some *shchi* * for the grandfather.

The old man seemed not at all to realize that we were speaking about him. He had subsided completely, smiling once in a while, and nodding. Only, when a gust of wind struck the hut, he grew nervous, with the air

* Cabbage-broth. — Tr.

of one who, being startled, listens to some distant sound.

Presently all became still in the hut. Only the last glimmer of the tallow-light shone feebly, and the cricket chirped his shrill, monotonous song. . . . From the forest came thousands of strong but muffled voices, calling to each other in the gloom. It seemed as though invisible powers were holding a stormy conclave in the darkness, combining a simultaneous attack upon the humble dwelling. From time to time, the indistinct murmur, growing louder, sounded close at hand; then the door shook, as though some one with an angry hissing voice were forcing it from outside, and the wind whistled in the chimney with a mournful wailing. Sometimes the storm-gusts would die away, followed by an oppressive stillness even more appalling to a timid spirit, and then again the tumult would return, and the old pines labored and groaned, as though striving to uproot themselves and fly away into space on the wings of the hurricane.

For a few brief moments I had lost myself.

When I woke, the storm was still howling in the forest, in various keys. A flickering light illumined the hut. The old man still sat on the bench, putting out his hands once in a while, as though hoping to find some one beside him. An expression of alarm and childish helplessness was visible on his poor old face.

"Oxanna, darling, who is it moaning in the woods?" — I could distinguish his plaintive whisper.

His hands groped helplessly around as he seemed to listen. "Ekh!" he murmured again, "no one is moaning. . . . It is only the storm raging, . . . that's all. . . . The forest is soughing. . . ."

Several minutes went by in silence. Streaks of bluish lightning flashed in at the small windows, revealing the fantastic outlines of the tall trees outside, which were straightway lost again in the murky gloom.

Suddenly the faint glimmer of the light within the room was eclipsed by a brighter flash of lightning, followed by a crashing peal of thunder that echoed through the woods. The old man moved uneasily on his bench.

"Oxanna, darling, who is it shooting in the woods?"

"Go to sleep, grandpa," said Mótrya's quiet voice from the *Lyézhánka*. "He is always like that in a storm; it makes him talk about Oxanna. He forgets that she died long ago. . . ."

Mótrya yawned, whispered a prayer, and stillness once more resumed its reign, interrupted only by the soughing forest and the feverish mutterings of the old man.

"The forest soughs, . . . it soughs, . . . my darling Oxanna, my dove. . . ."

Shortly after, a heavy shower began, drowning with its torrents both the outbursts of the wind and the groans of the pine-forest. . . .

EASTER NIGHT.

It was Holy Saturday in 188– . . .

Evening had long since enfolded the silent earth. The ground, warmed during the day by the rays of the sun, was now cooling beneath the invigorating influence of the night-frost. It seemed like one sighing, while its breath, forming a silvery mist, rose glistening in the rays of the starlit sky, like clouds of incense, to greet the approaching holiday.

All was still. In the cool night-breeze the small provincial town of N. stood silent, waiting to hear the first stroke of the bell from the high cathedral-tower. But the town was not sleeping; a spirit of expectancy brooded beneath the veil of darkness, breathing through the shadows of the silent and deserted streets. Now and then a belated workman, who had but just escaped from his servile task ere the holiday began, passed, hurrying on his way; once

in a while a drosky rattled by, leaving silence behind it. Life had fled indoors and hidden itself, in palace and hovel, from whose windows the lights shone far out upon the street, while over the city and the fields hovered the spirit of Resurrection.

Although the moon stood high above the horizon, the town still rested in the broad, deep shadow of a hill, crowned by a gloomy and massive edifice, whose peculiarly straight and severe outlines were sharply defined in the golden ether. The sombre gates were hardly to be distinguished amid the gloom of its deeply shadowed walls, while the towers on the four corners stood out boldly against the azure sky, and gradually over all the moon poured its flood of liquid gold.

Suddenly on the sensitive air of the expectant night came the first stroke from the high cathedral-belfry; then another, and still another. A minute later and the whole air throbbed and swelled, as the countless bells rang out, uniting in one harmonious peal. From the gloomy building overshadowing the town there came a faint, broken harmony, that

seemed to flutter helplessly in the air, and thence to rise into the ethereal light, and join the mighty chord. The singing ceased, the sounds dissolved in air, and the silence of the night gradually resumed its sway; a faint echo seemed to hover for a while, like the vibration of an invisible harp-string. Now the fires were gradually extinguished, the church-windows shone forth brightly, and the earth seemed ready to proclaim once more the old tidings of peace, love, and good-will.

The bolts of the dark gates in the gloomy building creaked, and a band of soldiers, with clanking arms, sallied forth to relieve the night-sentinels; on approaching the corners, they would halt, and a dark form, with measured steps, would detach itself from the rest, while the former sentinel took his place in the ranks, and the soldiers went on their way, skirting the high prison-wall, that glistened in the moon-beams.

As they reached its western side, a young recruit stepped forward from the ranks to relieve the sentry who was posted there; a rustic awkwardness still showed itself in his

movements, and his young face betrayed the absorbed attention of a novice who was to occupy for the first time a responsible post. He faced the wall, presented arms, made two steps forward, and, shouldering his musket, stood beside the sentry he was to replace. The latter, turning slightly towards him, repeated the usual formula, in the sing-song tone of discipline.

"From corner to corner. . . . Look out! . . . Do not sleep or doze!" He spoke rapidly, while the recruit listened with close attention, and a peculiar expression of anxiety and sadness in his gray eyes.

"You understand?" asked his superior.

"Yes, sir!"

"Then, look out!" he added, sharply; but, suddenly changing his tone, he said, good-naturedly: —

"Don't be afraid, Faddéyef; you are not a woman! I hope you are not afraid of the Lyéshy!" *

"Why should I be afraid of him?" replied Faddéyef. Then he added, "But I tell you,

* The Spirit of the Woods. — Tr.

my good fellows, I have a misgiving." This simple and almost childish confession made the soldiers laugh.

"There's simplicity for you!" exclaimed the leader, in tones of contempt. Then giving the order, "Shoulder arms! march!" the sentries, with measured tread, disappeared around the corner, and the sound of their footsteps was soon lost in the distance. The sentinel shouldered his musket, and began to pace along the wall.

Inside the prison, at the first stroke of the bell, all was in motion. It was long since the sad and gloomy prison-night had witnessed so much life. It seemed as if the church-bells had really brought tidings of liberty; for the grimy doors of the cells opened in turn, and their occupants, clad in long gray garments, the fatal patches on their backs, filed in rows along the corridors, on their way to the brilliantly lighted prison-church. They came from all directions, — from right and left, descending and ascending the stairway, — and amid the echoing footsteps rang the sound of arms and the clanking of chains. On entering the

church, this gray mass of humanity poured into the space allotted to them, behind the railing, and stood there in silence. The windows of the church were protected by strong iron bars. . . .

The prison was empty, except in the four towers, where, in small, strongly bolted cells, four men, in solitary confinement, were restlessly pacing to and fro, stopping once in a while to listen at the key-hole to the snatches of church-singing that reached their ears. . . .

And, beside these, in one of the ordinary cells, in a bunk, lay a sick man. The overseer, to whom this sudden illness had been reported, went into his cell as they were escorting the prisoners to church, and, leaning over him, looked into his eyes, that were gazing fixedly before him, and in which shone a peculiar light.

"Ivánof! Ivánof!" he called out to the invalid.

The convict never turned his head, but continued muttering something unintelligible, moving his parched lips with difficulty.

"Carry him to the hospital to-morrow!"

said the overseer, as he left the cell, appointing a sentry to guard the door. The latter, after a close examination of the delirious patient, shook his head, saying as he did so, "A vagrant! Poor fellow! you are not likely to tramp any more!" The overseer continued his way along the corridor, and entered the church, taking up his post by the door, where, with frequent genuflections, he listened devotedly to the service. Meanwhile the mutterings of the unconscious man filled the empty cell.

He did not seem old; on the contrary, he looked strong and muscular. He was delirious, apparently re-living his recent past, while a look of distress disfigured his face. Fate had played him a sorry trick. He had tramped thousands of versts through the Siberian forests and mountains, had suffered countless dangers and privations, always urged onward by a consuming homesickness, and sustained by one hope — that he might live to see his native place, and be once more with his own people, if it were but for a month, or even a week. Then he would be resigned, even if he had to go back again. But it chanced that when only a

few hundred versts from his native village he had been recaptured, and confined in this prison. Suddenly his mutterings ceased. His eyes dilated, and his breathing became more even. . . . Brighter dreams flitted across his fevered brain. . . . The forest soughs. . . . He knows it well, that soughing; monotonous, musical, and powerful. . . . He can distinguish its various tones; the language of each tree — the majestic pine, dusky green, rustling high overhead, . . . the whispering cedars, . . . the bright, merry birch, tossing its flexible branches, . . . the trembling aspen, fluttering its timid, sensitive leaves. . . . The free birds sing; the stream rushes across the stony chasm; and a swarm of gibbering magpies, detectives of the forest, are soaring in the air over the path followed by the vagrant through this almost impenetrable thicket.

It seemed as if a breeze from the free forest were wafted through the prison-cell. The invalid sat up and drew a long breath, gazing intently before him, while a sudden gleam of consciousness flashed into his eyes. . . . The vagrant, the habitual fugitive, beheld before

him an unaccustomed sight, . . . an open door! . . .

In his frame, enfeebled by disease, a powerful instinct sprang to life. His delirium either disappeared, or centred itself on one idea, which, like a ray of sunlight, illumined the chaos of his thoughts. Alone! and with an open door! In a moment he was on his feet. It seemed as if the fever had left his brain, and was only perceptible in his eyes, which had a fixed and menacing expression.

Some one had just come out from the church, leaving the door ajar.

The strains of the harmonious singing, subdued by the distance, reached the ear of the vagrant, and then died away. His face softened, his eyes grew dim, and his imagination reproduced a long cherished scene: A mild night, the whisper of the pines, their branches swaying above the old church of his native village; . . . a throng of countrymen; the lights reflected in the river, and this same chant. . . . He must make haste with his journey, that he may hear this at home, with his family! . . .

All this time, in the corridor, near the church-door, the overseer prayed devoutly, kneeling, and touching his forehead to the ground. . . .

Meanwhile, the young recruit paced to and fro on his beat along the prison wall, which glowed with a phosphorescent light. A broad, level field, recently freed from snow, lay before him.

A light wind rustled through the tall grass, inclining him to a sad and pensive mood.

The moon hung high above the horizon; the expression of anxiety had vanished from Faddéyef's face. He stopped by the wall, and, setting his musket on the ground, rested his hand on the muzzle, on which he leaned his head, falling into a deep reverie. He could not yet wholly grasp the idea of his presence in this place, on this solemn Easter night, beside the wall, with a musket in his hand, and opposite the vacant field. He had by no means ceased to be a peasant; many things clear to a soldier were to him incomprehensible; and he was often teased by being called "a rustic." But a short time ago he was a free man, had the care of a household, owned a field, and was at

liberty to labor when and where he pleased. Now, an indefinite, inexplicable fear beset his every step and movement, forcing the awkward young rustic into the groove of strict discipline. At this moment he was alone . . . the bleak landscape before him, and the wind whistling through the dry grass, made him dreamy; and memories of familiar scenes passed through his mind. He seemed to see his native village! The same moon shone above it, the same breeze blew over it; he saw the lighted church, and the dark pines tossing their green heads. . . .

Suddenly he became conscious of his present surroundings, and surprise kindled his blue eyes, as though he were questioning: "What are these? this field, this wall and musket?" For an instant he realized where he was, but in another moment the whistling breeze wafted him back to familiar scenes; and again the soldier dreamt, leaning on his musket. . . .

All at once, close beside him, appeared a head over the top of the wall . . . the eyes glimmering like two coals. . . . The vagrant peered into the open field, and beyond it to the

shadowy line of the distant forest . . . his chest expanded as he greedily inhaled the refreshing breath of "mother night." He let himself down by his hands, gently gliding along the wall.

The joyful ringing had awakened the slumbering night. The door of the prison-church was opened, and the procession moved into the yard.* In waves of melody the singing poured forth from the church. The soldier started, lifted his cap, and was about to make the sign of the cross . . . when he suddenly stopped, with his hand raised in the act of prayer, while the vagrant, having reached the ground, swiftly started on a run towards the tall grass.

"Stop, pray, stop, my dearest fellow!" exclaimed the soldier, in a terrified voice, as he raised his musket. At the sight of this gray figure fleeing from pursuit, all his shapeless and terrible fears took a definite form. "Duty — responsibility!" flashed across his mind, and,

* On Easter night a part of the ceremony of the Greek Church consists in the carrying of crosses and banners by the clergy around the outside of the church, in commemoration of the seeking of the body of Christ by Joseph of Arimathea. — Tr.

raising his musket, he aimed at the fugitive. But before pulling the trigger he pitifully shut his eyes. . . .

Meanwhile, above the town there rose, hovering in the ether, a harmonious and prolonged chime, marred only by the prison-bell, that trembled and fluttered like a wounded bird; and from beyond the wall the sounds of the joyous chant, "Christ is arisen," reached far into the field. Suddenly, above all other sounds, came the report of a musket, followed by a faint, helpless groan, like a plaintive and dying protest. Then for a moment all was still; and only the distant echoes of the vacant field repeated with a sad murmur the last reverberation of the shot amid the silence of the terror-stricken night.

A SAGHALINIAN.

THE TALE OF A VAGRANT.

My comrade had gone, and I was to spend the night alone in our yourt.*

Not feeling in the mood for working, I did not light the fire, and, as I reclined on my bed, I fell by degrees under the dismal spell of the gathering gloom and silence, while the waning daylight merged itself into the cold night-mist. Little by little, the last rays of light disappeared from the ice windows, and profound darkness crept out from the corners, veiling the sloping walls of the yourt, which seemed gradually contracting more and more over my head. For a while, the outlines of the fireplace remained dimly visible, like some ugly Penate of a Yakút dwelling, who, with outstretched arms, meets the invading darkness,

* Siberian hut. Many of the Russian exiles adopt the winter expedients of the Yakúts or inhabitants of Yakútsk. — Tr.

as if invoking it in silent prayer. But at last even these faint outlines were lost in the utter darkness. Only in three spots shone a soft phosphorescent light like a gleam from the dark eyes of the Yakút Frost peering in at the windows. Minutes and hours passed in silence, and I was not aware how imperceptibly had crept upon me that fatal hour when a longing for home fully takes possession of one's soul, — the hour when, conjured up by a fevered imagination, all those hills, forests, and interminable steppes that lie between one's self and all that life holds dear rise threateningly in their measureless and unconquered distance. All so far away and so utterly lost, now beckoning, now seeming to fade from sight, and flickering in the dim distance like the glimmer of a dying hope. The suppressed yet ever present grief, buried deeply in the recesses of one's heart, now boldly raises its ill-omened head, and, amid the universal stillness and darkness, plainly whispers the terrible words: "Forever in this grave, . . . forever!"

A gentle whining, coming from the flat roof,

through the chimney, reached my ears, and roused me from my stupor.

It was my intelligent friend, my faithful dog, who, chilled at his post, was asking what troubled me, and why, when the cold was so severe, I did not light the fire. I rose, conscious that I was playing a losing game in this struggle with silence and darkness, and decided to have recourse to the means at hand, — the Spirit of the yourt — Fire.

In winter the Yakút never allows his fire to go out, and has, therefore, no way of closing the chimney. We had contrived some rude appliances so that our chimney could be closed from the outside; but, in order to do so, it was necessary to climb up on the flat roof of the yourt.

I went up on to the roof by means of steps which had been cut in the snow that protected the yourt. Our dwelling stood on the outer edge of the settlement.

Generally, from the roof we could see the narrow valley and the hills that enclosed it, as well as the fires of the yourts of exiled Tartars and of those occupied by the descend-

ants of Russian settlers, who in the course of years had become Yakút. Now, all was enveloped in a cold, gray, impenetrable mist, which hung immovable, condensed by a cold of forty degrees, and pressing the silent earth with increasing weight.

Everywhere, a dull gray expanse of fog met the eye, save where, high overhead, twinkled a solitary star, piercing the cold shroud with its sharp rays.

Around all was still. . . . The high bank of the river, the miserable yourts of the settlement, the small church, the smooth and snowy valley, the dark strip of forest, — all became merged in this shoreless sea of fog. The roof of the yourt, with its rude clay chimney, where I was standing, with the dog crouching at my feet, seemed like an island in an illimitable gray ocean.

All was cold, bleak, and still. The night was the embodiment of terror, — constrained and watchful, — like one who strives to hide himself. The dog whined gently and pitifully, evidently in terror of the benumbing frost. Crouching at my feet, and plaintively stretch-

ing out his sharp nose and pricking up his ears, he gazed intently into the thick, gathering dusk.

Suddenly he growled. I listened. At first, I could distinguish nothing; then, in that strained silence, a sound was heard, another and still another, — as of a horse galloping far away on the meadows. Thinking of the lonely rider, who, judging by the sound, was as yet some two or three miles away from the hamlet, I hastily ran down from the roof and entered the yourt. An unprotected face, exposed to the air, might result in a frost-bitten nose or cheek. The dog, giving one loud and hasty bark in the direction of the galloping, followed me.

Soon in the wide, open mouth of the fireplace, in the middle of the yourt, a bright fire of chips was lighted. I added to it some dry logs of pitchy birch, and in a few moments my dwelling was totally changed. Now the silent yourt was filled with noise and talking. The fire, with a hundred tongues, played among the logs, enveloping them, jumping, snarling, hissing, and snapping. Something bright and

living, wide-awake and talkative, filled the yourt, peeping into all its nooks and corners. When, at times, the crackling of the flames ceased, I could hear the hot sparks fly up the short, straight chimney, snapping in the frosty air. But soon the fire renewed its play with redoubled energy, while frequent and loud reports, like pistol-shots, echoed through the yourt.

Now that all around me was moving, talking, bustling, and dancing, I did not feel as lonely as before. The ice windows, through which, but one moment before, the frosty night had peered, now sparkled like gems, reflecting the flames. I comforted myself by thinking that my yourt alone, like a small volcano in the midst of this cold, dreary night, was pouring out a torrent of fiery sparks, flickering spasmodically in the air, amidst volumes of white smoke.

Motionless as a statue, the dog sat gazing at the fire. From time to time he turned his head, and in his intelligent eyes I could read the expression of love and gratitude. A heavy tramp was heard outside; yet he did not stir, content-

ing himself with a complacent whine. He knew that these were only our horses, that had been standing somewhere under a fence, and now had come to the yourt, and were watching the sparks fly merrily upward, and the broad ribbon of warm smoke. Suddenly the dog reluctantly turned from the fire, and growled, and the next moment bounded to the door. I let him out, and, from his accustomed post on the roof, he began barking furiously. I looked out of the door-way; apparently, the lonely traveller whose approach I had previously heard through the sensitive silence of the frosty night had been attracted by my cheerful fire. He had taken down the bars of the gate, so as to make a passageway for his heavily laden horse.

I was not expecting any one of my acquaintances. A native would hardly have come so late; and if he had, he would have known where his friends lived, and would not have turned in at the first fire. "Therefore," I said to myself, "this can only be some settler." Generally, we were not anxious to see such company; but now any man was welcome. I

knew that shortly the bright light of the fire would grow dim, the flames indolently and slowly enveloping the charred logs; that still later only a heap of coals would remain, with the whispering fiery snakes gliding amongst them, more and more slowly, and finally silence and darkness would reign supreme in the yourt, and again would my heart be filled with sorrow. The faint spark in the ashes would glimmer like a half-closed eye, peering out once or twice, and then dropping to sleep. And once more I should remain alone; . . . alone in the long, endless, and dreary night.

The thought of spending the night under the same roof with a man whose past might possibly be stained with blood did not enter my head. Siberia teaches one to find the man in the murderer; and although a more intimate acquaintance saves one from idealizing "the unfortunate" who has broken locks, stolen horses, or crushed his neighbor's skull on a dark night, still, such an acquaintance gives one a chance to study the complicated springs of human motives.

One learns what to expect of a man. A

murderer is not always employed in murdering. He lives and feels like other men, and like them he is grateful to those who shelter him from frost and storm. But whenever I chanced to make a new acquaintance among these folk, particularly if he happened to be the owner of a saddle-horse, with well filled saddle-bags hanging on either side, then the question concerning the ownership of the horse, as well as that of the contents of the bags, called forth certain suspicions, and aroused speculation as to the means and ways of their acquirement.

The heavy horse-hair-covered door of the yourt opened towards the inclined wall, a wave of steam followed, and a stranger entered, and approached the fireplace. He was a tall man, broad-shouldered and well built. One could perceive, at the first glance, that he was not a Yakút, although he was dressed like one.

He wore soft boots, made of pure white horse-hide; the wide sleeves of his Yakút fur coat rose in folds over his ears; his head and neck were protected by a large shawl, the ends of which were tied around his waist. This, as well as his Yakút hat, the top of which alone

was visible, was thickly covered with frozen snow-flakes.

The stranger went up to the fire, and with his benumbed fingers untied the shawl and the leather straps of his hat. When he had thrown them back, I saw the fresh, young face of a man of thirty. His large features were stamped with that peculiar expression that I have often noticed on the faces of the stárostas * of convict artéls, as well as on those of all men whose authority is recognized in their sphere, but who still feel obliged to be on their guard with strangers. His expressive, glancing, black eyes and his protruding jaw betrayed a passionate nature. The vagrant † (for I judged, from a certain slight, but unmistakable sign, that my guest belonged to this class) was well used to controlling his passions. Only a slight nervous tremor of the lower lip, and the twitching of the muscles of the face at times, betrayed the intensity of some inward struggle.

* Elder of convict unions.

† "Vagrant," or "vagabond," is the name given to escaped convicts who "tramp" their way through Siberia back to Europe.

Fatigue, the frosty night, and perhaps an indefinable sadness which the traveller felt as he rode through this impenetrable fog, had somewhat softened the sharp outlines of his face and stamped their impress on his brow and in his dark eyes so full of pathos. His aspect was in harmony with my present feelings, and awakened in me an unaccountable sympathy. Without further divesting himself of his wraps, he leaned against the chimney and took a pipe out of his pocket.

"How do you do, sir!" he said, knocking his pipe on the corner of the hearth, and at the same time scanning me with a swift yet searching glance.

"How do you do!" I replied, also looking at him with curiosity.

"I beg your pardon, sir, for intruding thus. I only want to warm myself a little and to smoke my pipe; then I will go, for I have friends here who are glad to see me at any time. They live two miles away."

His tones were reserved, like those of a man who was evidently unwilling to appear intrusive. Again he gave me a quick and scruti-

nizing glance, as though awaiting my reply in order to form a plan of action in accordance therewith. "I will treat you as you treat me," his cool and steady glances seemed to say. At all events, the manners of my guest formed a pleasing contrast to the ordinary importunity of the Yakút settlers; though, evidently, had he not calculated on spending the night with me, he would not have led his horse into the yard, but would have fastened him to the fence outside.

"Who are you? What is your name?" I asked.

"My name? I am called Bagyláï. In Russian my name is Vasíli. Perhaps you may have heard about me? I live in the Bayangatáï District."

"A native of the Urál? A vagrant?"

An imperceptible smile of satisfaction flitted across the lips of the stranger.

"So you have heard about me?"

"N. has spoken to me of you. You were neighbors."

"Precisely! Mr. N. knows me well."

"I am happy to welcome you! You will

spend the night with me, will you not? I am all alone, and we will start the samovár."

The vagrant eagerly accepted my invitation.

"Thank you, sir! Since you ask me, I will stay. But I must take off my bags from the saddle, and bring them in; — my horse is fastened in the yard; still, it would be safer. The people in your settlement are sharpers, especially the Tartars."

He went out, and a moment after returned, bringing in the two saddle-bags. Unfastening the straps, he took out the provisions which he carried with him; pats of frozen milk and butter, several dozens of eggs, etc. The eggs he put on my shelves; and the rest he carried out into the entry, so that they would not melt. Then he took off his shawl, his fur coat, and his caftán, keeping on only his Turkey-red shirt and velveteen trousers, and seated himself before the fireplace.

"Well, sir," he said, looking up and smiling, "I may as well tell you the truth; as I was nearing your gate, I thought to myself, 'I wonder if the owner will allow me to spend the night with him?' Of course, I understand

very well that there are all sorts of characters among us, some of whom it would be impossible to ask to stay over night; but I am not of that class, I tell you frankly. Did you say that you had heard about me?"

"I have."

"Well, I am glad of it. I can say without boasting that I make an honest living. I own a cow, a three-year-old ox, and a horse. . . . I cultivate my land, and have a vegetable-garden besides."

The vagrant said all this in a constrained voice, his eyes fixed on one spot, gesticulating as he spoke, as though he were wondering at himself. His manner seemed to asseverate, "All that I tell you is true."

"Yes," he went on, in the same tone of voice, "I work, as God wishes us to do. I consider it better than stealing or highway robbery. . . . As I ride along the road, I see a fire, and I stop at your house. . . . You start the samovár and entertain me. I cannot fail to appreciate all this. Do I not speak the truth?"

"Certainly," I replied.

While making these statements, the vagrant

appeared to be soliloquizing, as if trying to convince himself of the advantages of his present life.

I had heard about Vasíli from my friends. Formerly a vagrant, he had later become a settler, and now for two years had been living in his own house, in the midst of a forest, near a lake, in one of the great Yakút districts. Among the reckless and God-forsaken crowd of settlers, who live from hand to mouth, often stealing and plundering, he was one of the few who preferred to labor, a mode of life which here offered an easy chance to improve one's condition. Generally speaking, the Yakút are a very good-natured people, and in many districts it is customary to offer the newly arrived settlers substantial help.

Were it not for such help, a man whom circumstances have placed in the rigorous and to him unknown conditions of this country would either soon perish of cold and hunger or take to highway robbery. In a general way such help was more willingly given in the form of "travelling expenses," by means of which the Yakút commune often endeavors

to rid itself of a settler, sending him away to the mines, whence the majority of these uncomfortable citizens never return; yet in most cases where a man shows a willingness to work in good earnest, help is freely proffered. The commune gave Vasíli a hut and an ox, and the first year planted for him six poods * of wheat.

The harvest was good; and, in addition to this, he hired himself out advantageously to the Yakút as a mower, and also traded in tobacco, — so that in two years his affairs were flourishing. The Yakút treated him with deference, the settlers called him "Vasíli Ivánitch" to his face, modifying it to "Vaska" only behind his back. The priests, on their way to visit their parishioners, liked to stop at his house, and, whenever he chanced to call upon them, invited him to take a seat at their table. He was also acquainted with some of the educated class whose lot had been cast in this distant country. It did seem now as though he could live well. Marriage alone remained to be accomplished. Of course, this

* A pood, or pud, is thirty-six pounds avoirdupois.

might be a more difficult task, as vagrants are usually forbidden to marry; but even this could be arranged for a small sum of money, a calf, or a good colt.

Still, as I examined the young vagrant's energetic face, I could guess that he was somewhat eccentric. After a while, this face attracted me less than at first, though still it was a pleasant one. The expression of his dark eyes was thoughtful and intelligent; his features were strong, his manners easy, and in his voice one could distinguish the satisfied ambition of a proud nature. Only, at times, the lower part of his face twitched nervously, and his eyes grew dim. It seemed to require an effort to preserve this calm tone, beneath which a certain sadness, controlled by his will alone, made itself manifest in spite of him.

At first I could not account for it; but later I understood all. The habitual vagrant was deceived when he declared himself contented with his life, his house, his cow, his three-year-old ox, and the respect that was shown him. In his inmost soul, he was perfectly sure, although he tried to suppress the conviction,

that this commonplace life, in a strange and unloved land, was not to his taste. From the depths of his heart arose a longing for the forest life — that unknown, fascinating, and delusive vista already beckoning him. It was thus that I afterwards understood him.

At the moment, I only saw that, in spite of his outward calmness, something was tormenting and troubling him, and a longing was penned up in his soul that demanded an outlet. While I was busy with the samovár, Vasíli remained before the fireplace, thoughtfully gazing at the flames. When all was ready, I called him.

"Thank you, sir," he said, rising. "I am much obliged for your kind hospitality. Ah!" he exclaimed, passionately, turning abruptly toward me, "would you believe me that when I saw your fire, my heart leaped, I assure you. I knew it was the fire of a Russian.

"It was cold and dark while I was riding through the fields; and whenever my horse saw the smoke of a yourt, he was inclined to turn in; — of course, he is a Yakút beast, and does not know any better. But, for my part, I did

not care to enter at hap-hazard, even though it were a comfortable yourt. To be sure, I could have warmed myself, and even have found some brandy, — but I did not care to do it. When I saw your fire, I thought to myself, This is the place where I should like to rest, if the master will but grant me leave. Thank you for allowing me to remain; and if you ever happen to come our way, do me the favor to call on me. I shall have the wherewithal to entertain you, and you will be most welcome."

II.

Having finished his tea, Vasíli seated himself before the fire. He could not go to bed as yet, for he had to wait for his horse to cool before he could feed it. The Yakút horse is not particularly heavy, but it has great powers of endurance. The natives use these horses to carry butter and other products to the remote mines, to the woods where the Tungus live, and to the distant Oochur,* riding hundreds

* A tributary of the Lena.

of versts through places where to obtain hay is out of the question. When they wish to camp, they shovel away the snow, make a fire, and drive the horses into the woods, where the intelligent creatures provide for themselves, nibbling last year's grass from under the snow, and in the morning are again ready for another long expedition. The animal has, however, one peculiarity. It cannot be fed immediately on arriving from a journey or just before starting, and frequently a well fed horse goes without food for twenty hours or more before starting on a journey.

Vasíli had to wait three hours, and, as I did not feel inclined to go to bed myself, we sat chatting at intervals. Vasíli — or Bagyláï, as he was in the habit of calling himself — now and then added wood to the fire. This was a habit of his, which he had acquired during the long evenings of the Yakút winter.

"Far away," he suddenly exclaimed, after a prolonged silence, as if in answer to his own thoughts.

"What is far?" I asked.

"Our country, Russia. . . . Everything is so

different here, whichever way you turn. Take, for instance, the cattle, or a horse. Our horses, after a long journey, are fed without delay; but if this one were to be fed now, it would die. Look at the people! — They live in the woods, feed on horse-flesh and raw meat; even carrion is not despised! It is shocking! They have no delicacy. — If you open a tobacco-pouch in a yourt, immediately all stretch out their hands, like beggars, and you are obliged to share with them."

"Well, that is their custom," I replied. "They also give in their turn. They have helped to set you up. . . ."

"Yes. That is true."

"Do you really feel satisfied with your life?" I asked, watching him closely.

He smiled enigmatically.

"With life . . ." he echoed, tossing another log into the fire. The flames lighted his face; his eyes looked dim.

"Well, sir, if I should begin to tell you! . . . I have seen very little good in my life, and little do I see now. Until my eighteenth year it was fairly pleasant, and I lived happily

as long as I obeyed my parents. When I ceased obeying them, my life ended. Since that time, I cannot call it a life — only a vain struggle."

Shadows flitted across his face, and his lower lip trembled convulsively, like that of a child; he seemed to be living in imagination in the time when he "obeyed his parents." He had become a child again, and, childlike, was ready to weep over his own ruined life.

Noticing that I was looking at him intently, he shook his head.

"It is of no use talking about it! Wouldn't you like to hear how we escaped from the island of Saghálin?"

Of course, I eagerly assented; and all night, until the break of day, I listened to the vagrant's tale.

III.

On a summer night of 187–, the steamer Nízhni-Nóvgorod was crossing the waters of the Sea of Japan, trailing behind it, against the blue sky, a long ribbon of black smoke.

The steep shore of the Marine Province was visible on the left, through the hazy light of the silvery fog. On the right, the ripples of the Straits of La Pérouse were lost in the distance. The steamer was shaping its course for Saghálin, but the rocky shores of that island were not yet in sight. All on board was quiet and peaceful. On the top of the house might be seen the moonlit figures of the boatswain and the officers on duty, while the flickering lights of the cabins were reflected from the dark surface of the ocean.

The Nízhni-Nóvgorod was "freighted with convicts" for Saghálin. Naval laws are always strict, and on board a ship with such a freight they are still more stringent. During the daytime the convicts, closely guarded, exercised in turn. The rest of the time they remained in their cabin, under deck. There were more convicts than sentries; but, to make amends for this inequality, every step and movement of the gray crowd was controlled by a firm hand, a well disciplined crew strictly guarding against the possibility of a mutiny. Indeed, every chance here was taken into consideration, even

the improbable: supposing a wild beast were to make its appearance in the midst of this crowd, and, in its despair, defy all danger; if shots fired through the grating had no effect, and the raging animal threatened to break down its iron cage, even in such a case the captain would still have a powerful remedy at his command.

He would only have to call out to the engineer's department these words: —

"Have lever so and so . . . opened!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" and, instantly, scalding steam would be poured into the convict's quarter, as if it were but a hole filled with cockroaches. This unique and powerful remedy prevented every possibility of a general outbreak such as might have been feared from the gray population of the hold. They occupied a large cabin with a low ceiling. In the daytime the light came through small dead-lights, standing out in the dark background like two rows of buttons — decreasing, and finally disappearing, on the rounded sides of the steamer's hull. Along the middle of the hold ran a narrow passage, shaped like a corridor. Iron grat-

ings separated this passageway from the bunks of the convicts. Here, leaning on muskets, the sentries were posted. Lanterns, in a funereal line, shed a dim light through this passage in the evening.

Not a movement of the gray passengers behind these bars escaped the eye. Whether a burning tropical sun stood overhead; or the wind whistled through the bending and creaking rigging; or high waves washed the decks in a raging gale, and the steamer groaned under the lashing of the storm,—it was all the same to them — to these hundreds of men, who had no concern with what was going on overhead, or whither their floating prison was steering.

Meanwhile, under the pressure of this strict régime, the gray population behind the iron bars lived its usual life, and on a certain night —when the steamer was leisurely flapping its wheels, and the glow of its fires was reflected from the undulating surface of the deep; when the sentries, leaning on their muskets, dozed in the corridors of the hold, and the lanterns, slightly jarred by the sleepless engine, shed

their dim and mournful light along the iron-bound passageway, — behind the bars, where the sleeping forms of the convicts rested in motionless rows, there, behind these very bars, a silent tragedy was enacted. The gray society in shackles executed its own culprits. . . .

The following morning, at the time of the roll-call, three convicts remained in their bunks, unheeding the stern calls of the guards. When the latter went behind the bars and lifted their coverings, it was plainly to be seen that these three would never again answer to the roll-call.

In every convict artél all the most important affairs are controlled by an influential and united group, while to the mass — the gray, impersonal crowd — such events are often quite unexpected. Terrified by the ghastly tragedy of the night, the population of the hold was at first hushed. An awkward silence prevailed. Outside, one could hear nothing but the splashing of the sea, the noise of the murmuring waves cleft by the steamer's hull and hurrying along in her wake, the panting breath of the

engine, and the monotonous strokes of the piston.

Soon, however, the consequences of the event began to be discussed among the convicts. The officers did not intend to overlook this unpleasant episode, or to ascribe these deaths to an accident or illness. The proofs of the murder were evident. An investigation was instituted, but the convicts unanimously denied all knowledge of the affair. Perhaps at some other time it would not have been difficult to find several persons among them who, through fear or bribes, could be induced to disclose all they knew; now, however, apart from the feeling of comradeship, all tongues were held by fear. No matter how dreaded might be the officials, or how stern their commands, the artél was more dreaded still. Undoubtedly, some must have been awake that night. Certain ears must have heard the stifled sounds of the struggle "under the cover," *

* To "make a cover" means, in the convict dialect, to kill a man inside the prison-walls. A long, loose coat worn by the convicts is generally thrown over the head of the victim, in order to deaden his cries. This is called "making a cover." — *Author's note.*

the death-rattle, and the panting breath so unlike that of sleeping men; yet no one, by even a syllable, denounced the perpetrators of this terrible crime. The officials were obliged to lay the responsibility upon the acknowledged superintendents of the artél, the stárosta and his assistant. On the same day, they were handcuffed and put in irons. Vasíli, who at that time was known by another name, was the assistant.

Two more days passed, and the affair had been fully discussed by the convicts. It was supposed at first that all traces were concealed; that it would be impossible to discover the culprits; and that the lawful representatives of the artél would only be subjected to a slight disciplinary punishment. To all questions put to them, the convicts had but one straightforward, and plausible answer: "We were asleep." But on closer investigation the suspicion fell on Vasíli. It is true that in such cases as this the artél always acts in such a way as to prove, conclusively, the innocence of the accused parties, and by adopting such a course Vasíli could easily have shown

that he took no part whatever in the tragedy. Nevertheless, while discussing the affairs of the stárosta's assistant, the experienced convicts, who had been through fire and water, shook their heads dubiously.

"I say, my boy," said an old, weather-beaten vagrant, one day, to Vasíli, "as soon as we arrive on Saghálin, you had better have your legs in readiness. It is a bad business, that affair of yours! — very bad!"

"Why so?"

"Because . . . is it the first, or the second time that you have been convicted?"

"The second."

"That's the trouble. And do you remember whom the dead Féydka reported? Was it not you? He was the cause of your being handcuffed for a week, was he not?"

"You are right."

"And what did you say to him at the time? The soldiers heard it! Was it not something like a threat?"

Vasíli and the others understood the full significance of this remark.

"Now, my advice to you is to think the

matter over, and make up your mind to be shot."

A general murmur followed this speech.

"Don't talk like an idiot, Burán!" said the convicts, angrily.

"The old man does not know what he is saying."

"He is losing his mind from old age. It is a poor joke to talk like that."

"I am not losing my mind!" exclaimed the old man, indignantly. "Much you greenhorns know! You act as though you were in Russia! —I know the local laws! I tell you, Vasíli, when the report is sent to the governor-general of the Amúr province, you may expect to be shot. Even if, as a great mercy, they whip you with knouts, instead of putting you to death, that will be still worse. You will not survive. You must remember, my dear fellow, that you are on board ship, and that naval laws are twice as strict as land laws. However," he added, feebly, evidently fatigued with such a long discourse, "I don't care what becomes of you all."

The dim eyes of the old man, with whom life

had dealt so unkindly, had long been used to look at things through a medium of mingled gloom and indifference. He waved his hand despairingly, and walked away.

Often among such bands of convicts are to be found men fully conversant with the law; and when, after a careful consideration of an affair like the present one, a definite opinion is formed, it is generally confirmed by coming events. In the present case, all the authorities agreeing with Burán, it was decided that Vasíli must escape; and as it seemed likely that he was to be held responsible for the artél, the latter considered itself in duty bound to help him. All remnants of biscuits and rusks were made over to Vasíli, and he began to "form a party" of such as wished to participate in the attempt to escape.

As Burán had already twice escaped from Saghálin, he was naturally among the first who were asked to join. The old man decided without hesitating a moment.

"I am doomed to die in the forest," he said, "and I don't know but that such a death is more becoming for a vagrant. Only,

my age is against me; for I am getting worn out."

The old man blinked a moment, then, —

"Go ahead and collect your party," he added. "It would be useless for two or three to make such an attempt; the road is too rough. When ten of us are ready, we can start. You may depend on me; I will walk till my feet refuse to carry me. If it were only my lot to die anywhere but on this cursed island!"

Burán winked rapidly, and tears ran down his weather-beaten face.

"The old man must be getting feeble," thought Vasíli, as he started off to make up the party.

IV.

Rounding the precipitous cape, the steamer entered the bay. The convicts gathered about the hatchways, and with feverish curiosity watched the high shores of the island, looming up before them through the evening twilight.

At nightfall they entered the port. The outlines of the island had the effect of drawing

nearer as they approached, and stood out more clearly defined in their black grandeur. The boat stopped. The sailors formed in line, and the convicts were led out.

On shore, in the darkness, a few lights were visible; the water splashed against the beach, the sky was overcast, and a sympathetic cloud of sadness weighed on all hearts. "This is Fort Doué," said Burán, in an undertone. "Here we shall have to live in barracks at first."

After roll-call the party was conducted on shore, in the presence of the local officials. Having lived several months continuously on board ship, now the convicts once more walked on solid ground. The steamer on which they had spent so long a time rocked gently in the dusk, softly sighing amid clouds of white steam.

Lights were moving ahead, and voices were heard.

"Is this the party?"

"It is."

"Show them the way to barrack No. 7."

The convicts followed the light. They were

walking in a disorderly line, and were surprised to have no one beside them, urging them on with musket-butts.

"Say, fellows, there is no escort with us!" several exclaimed in astonishment.

"Keep still!" angrily growled Burán. "What need is there for an escort! There is no danger that you will run away, even if you are not guarded. The island is large, and surrounded by water. You might die of hunger anywhere. Don't you hear the moaning of the sea?"

A heavy wind was rising. The lantern-lights flickered unsteadily under its gusts, and the roar of the sea as it beat on the shore sounded like the raging of an awakened wild beast.

"Don't you hear it roar?" said Burán, addressing Vasíli. "Look at it," he continued, "'Water all around us, and trouble ahead.'* You will have to cross the water; and think of the distance before you come to the crossing! . . . a desert! . . . woods and military outposts! . . . I have a foreboding that this at-

* A Russian proverb. — Tr.

tempt will not end well; — the sea gives us warning. I fear that I shall not escape from Saghálin; indeed, I do! Twice already have I escaped. The first time, I was caught in Blagovéstchinsk, and the second time in Russia . . . and I was brought here again. It must be my fate to die on this island."

"All may turn out well," replied Vasíli, encouragingly.

"You are a young man, and I am worn out. How angrily and mournfully the sea roars!"

The convicts who had occupied barrack No. 7 were removed, and the newly arrived party, temporarily guarded, was installed in their place.

Accustomed to strong bolts and to the confinement of prison-life, they would have rambled over the island like sheep let loose from their enclosures, had they not been thus guarded at first. The old convicts, who had already been living there for some time, were not locked up; for, becoming gradually familiar with the conditions of their exile, they had reached the conclusion that an attempt to escape is a dangerous undertaking, and usually means certain

death to those who attempt it; for only the most resolute and determined characters, after long and careful preparations, try this experiment—and such as they might be shut in by ten locks and yet would try to escape either from prison or from out-of-door labor.

"Now, Burán, you must advise us," said Vasíli to him, on the third day after their arrival. "You are our leader, and you will have to go ahead; so give us our orders. I suppose we ought to be getting ready."

"What can I advise!" replied the old man, reluctantly. "It is not an easy undertaking, and I am growing old. Well," after a pause, "about three days hence, the sentries will be withdrawn, and we shall be sent out to work. Besides, we are free to come and go at any time; only, one is not allowed to carry any bag. That is all there is to it."

"Do advise us, Burán, my good fellow; you know what is best."

Burán looked gloomy and careworn. He rarely spoke to any one, but muttered incessantly to himself. It seemed as if this old vagrant, who for the third time had been brought

back to the same place, was now losing his energy.

However, Vasíli had in the meantime succeeded in securing ten more able-bodied men, and was teasing Burán, in the hope of rousing him and of awakening his ardor. In this he sometimes succeeded, but eventually the old man always reverted to the difficulties of the road and bad omens. "I shall never escape from this island," he said, repeatedly, a sentence which expressed the depression of the unsuccessful vagrant. Nevertheless, in his brighter moods, the recollection of former attempts cheered him, and in the evening, when lying in his bunk beside Vasíli, he would talk to him about the island and the roads that they intended to follow.

Fort Doué lies on the western side of the island, facing the Asiatic shore. The Tartar Straits at this place are about three hundred versts in width; to attempt to cross in an open boat would be out of the question, and the vagrants naturally follow either this or the opposite shore of the island.

"If you are anxious to die, you can go any-

where you like," Burán was in the habit of saying; "the island is large, a wilderness and a forest. Even the native Ghiláks, who are well used to it, find few places where they can settle. If you go east, you run the risk of losing your way among the rocks, or of being pecked to death by hungry birds, or, if you live, you will probably go back of your own accord, when winter comes. If you go south, you will reach the end of the island and come to the ocean, which can only be crossed in a ship. There is but one road for us to follow, and that is to the north, skirting the shore for the entire distance. The sea will be our guide. After travelling some three hundred versts, we shall come to narrow straits, and it is there that we must cross in boats to the Amúr shore. Only, let me tell you, my boy," here Burán fell into his usual doleful strain, "we shall have trouble in passing the military outposts. The first one is called Várki, the second Pánghi, and the last one Póghib,* called so because it is usually here that we perish. And dear me! how cunningly these outposts are placed!

* Peril. — Tr.

Wherever a hillock rises, behind it you find an outpost. You are marching along, and stumble upon it without warning. The Lord have mercy on us!"

"But you have already been twice over the ground!"

"That is true." And the dull eyes of the old man kindled. "Listen to what I say, and do as I bid you. Shortly they will call on those who wish to volunteer as workmen in the mill. Have your names put down on the list; and when they are sending the provisions thither, put your rusks and biscuits in the cart. Peter, a former convict, has charge of the mill. Then will be the time for you to escape, — I mean, when you get to the mill. You will not be missed for three days. That is the way things are managed here. You can miss the roll-call for three days before any notice is taken of it. The doctor objects to corporal punishment, because the hospital is in such a wretched condition. If any one gets tired out and becomes ill from working, he goes into the woods instead of going to the hospital, and often recovers in the open air. But if he does

not put in an appearance on the third day, he is considered missing; and were he to come back of his own accord, it would make no difference — he might as well make up his mind, at once, to be flogged."

"At any rate, I hope we shall escape the flogging," replied Vasíli; "if we succeed in getting away, we will not return of our own accord."

"And if you don't," growled Burán, "it will be all the same; it will end in the crows devouring your carcass, as it lies not far from one of the outposts. The soldiers have no time to fool away for your sake; they won't escort you back hundreds of versts. Wherever they see you, they will shoot you down, and there is the end of it."

"Stop croaking, you old raven! Remember, we start to-morrow. Tell Bobróf what we need, and the artél will supply us."

The old man mumbled some reply, and left him with downcast head, while Vasíli went to his comrades and bade them get ready. He had given up the duties of stárosta's assistant some time before, and another man had been chosen in his place. The fugitives packed their

bags, exchanged their clothes for the strongest that could be found, and the next day volunteered to work on the mill. That very day they all left work, and hid themselves in the woods. Burán alone was not among them.

It was a well selected party. Among Vasíli's comrades were a personal friend of his, called Volóydka Makárof, a strong and agile man, who had already escaped twice from Kára; two Circassians, determined fellows, and invaluable as faithful comrades; and a Tartar, a great rogue, but skilful and ingenious. The rest were also vagrants, who had more than once wandered through Siberia.

Already the fugitives had been one day in the woods; . . . the night had passed, and the greater part of the following day; still no Burán. The Tartar was sent to the barracks to look him up. On arriving, he secretly called out an old convict, Bobróf, a friend of Vasíli's, a man who had great influence among his comrades. The next morning, Bobróf came to the spot where the fugitives were concealed.

"Well, comrades, how can I help you?"

"Send Burán to us at once. We cannot

start without him; and if he is waiting because he needs something, help him to get it. We are all waiting for him."

When Bobróf returned to the barracks, he saw that Burán had made no preparations whatever for starting. He found him walking restlessly about the barracks, talking to himself, and gesticulating wildly.

"What are you about, Burán?" he called out to him.

"Why, what is that to you?"

"How, what is that to me? Why are you not getting ready?"

"I *am* getting ready for my grave; that is what I am getting ready for."

This answer provoked Bobróf.

"What do you mean? Don't you know that the boys have already been three days in the bushes? Do you want to get them whipped? And you call yourself an old vagrant!"

These reproaches touched the old man to the quick.

"My time has gone by. I shall never escape from this island. . . . I am worn out!"

"Whether you are worn out or not, that is your own affair. Supposing you do not reach the end of your journey in safety, supposing you die on the way, you will not be blamed for that; but what if through any fault of yours eleven men were to be whipped? You see, the responsibility resting on you obliges you to go. If I should report this to the artél, what do you think they would do to you?"

"I know it all," replied Burán; "they would 'cover' me, and I should deserve it. It is not becoming for an old vagrant to die such a death. It seems as though it were my fate to go. Only, I have made no preparations."

"We will get you ready at once. What do you want?"

"Well, in the first place, I want twelve good new coats."

"But every man has a coat of his own!"

"You mind what I say!" replied Burán, with a show of temper. "I know that they have one apiece; but they need two. Each one will have to give the Ghiláks a coat for ferrying him across. Besides, I want twelve good

knives, about three-quarters of an arshin* long, two hatchets, and three kettles."

Bobróf called a meeting of the artél, and stated the case. Whoever had a good coat gave it to the vagrants. Every convict has an instinctive sympathy with each daring attempt to escape from their four prison-walls. Knives and kettles were furnished, some being bought, and some given by the convict settlers. In two days everything was ready. Thirteen days had already passed since the arrival of the party on the island, and the following morning Bobróf accompanied Burán to the hiding-place of the convicts, assisting him to carry the provisions.

In accordance with an old convict regulation, the men "stood up for prayers," something like a *Te Deum* was read for the occasion, and, bidding good-by to Bobróf, they started on their journey.

V.

"How you must have enjoyed starting!" I exclaimed, observing the animated expression and the cheerful voice of the narrator.

* About three-quarters of a yard.

"Indeed, we did! As we left the bushes and entered the woods, it seemed as though we had been born anew. We were very happy. Burán, alone, with downcast head, was marching in advance, muttering something to himself. He did not start in a cheerful mood; he may have felt that he had not far to go. We soon perceived that our leader was not to be relied on, although he was an experienced vagrant, having twice escaped from Saghálin, and was familiar with the road, walking along without hesitation like a dog following a trail, still my friend Volóydka and myself mistrusted him.

"'Look out,' he said to me, 'lest we get into trouble with Burán. Can't you see that he does not act like himself!'

"'What makes you think so?' I said.

"'Something must be the matter with him. He talks to himself, shaking his head now and then, and has given us no orders. We ought to have halted long before this; but on he walks, regardless of us. I tell you he is not as he should be.'

"Feeling sure that something was wrong, we

made haste to overtake him, exclaiming as we came up:—

"'Uncle!—I say, uncle! Why don't we halt? Isn't it time to rest awhile?'

"He turned, looked at us, then went on again.

"'Don't be in such a hurry to rest; the bullets will give you time for that at Várki or at Póghib, and it will be a thorough rest too.'

"'The deuce take you!' we thought to ourselves; but we did not venture to oppose him, for he was an old vagrant, and it was very possible that we were in the wrong. It would perhaps be wiser to travel as far as we could the first day.

"After walking for some time, Volóydka nudged me again.

"'I say, Vasíli, we had better be on the lookout!'

"'Why, what's the matter now?'

"'When we started, we were twenty versts from Várki; we have surely travelled eighteen, and we must take care not to stumble on an outpost.'

"'Burán! — I say, Burán! uncle!' he called out.

"'What do you want?'

"'Várki can't be far off.'

"'We are nowhere near it,' replied Burán, and off he started again.

"A catastrophe was close at hand, but, luckily for us, we spied a small boat moored in the river, close to the shore. As soon as we saw it, we all stopped. Makárof had to hold Burán by main force. If a boat were there, surely there must be a dwelling not far away. 'Halt, boys, and hide in the bushes!'

"Following the course of the stream, we entered the woods. Hills covered with birches rose on either side.

"From early spring the island is veiled in fog, and on this day, as usual, a thick mist enveloped it. As we climbed the hill, a breeze sprang up and drove the fog into the sea.

"Suddenly, at the foot of the hill, we discovered the outpost, almost directly at our feet. Dogs were sleeping in the yard, and soldiers walking about. We were indeed dismayed, for

we had barely escaped the very jaws of the wolf.

"'How is this, uncle Burán!' we said; 'see the outpost down there?'

"'Sure enough, it is! this is Várki,' he replied.

"'See here, uncle!' we said, 'you mustn't be vexed, but we have come to the conclusion that, even though you are our senior, we must look out for ourselves; we fear we may get into trouble if we follow your directions.'

"The old man wept.

"'Forgive me, comrades, for Christ's sake! — I am old,' he said. 'Forty years I have been on the tramp, and am worn out; my memory fails me. I remember some things, and I forget others. Don't be too hard on me! We must make haste and leave this place as soon as possible, for if somebody from the outpost happened to go berrying, or the dogs were to get on our scent, all would be lost!'

"We started forward, discussing this matter as we went along, and decided to watch Burán. I was chosen leader, to determine the time and place for halting and to make all necessary ar-

rangements. Burán was still to walk ahead, for he alone knew the way. His feet were tough; faint as he often grew with fatigue, they never failed him, as he went waddling along. And thus he walked till he drew his last breath.

"We followed the highlands, a safer although more difficult course. On the hills the woods rustled and the streams ran playfully over their rocky beds. The Ghilák aborigines live in the valleys, by the river-banks, or by the sea-side, because they feed on fish, of which there is so great a quantity that one who has not seen for himself could hardly believe the accounts — we used to catch them with our hands.

"Thus we cautiously advanced, sniffing the air as we walked along. Wherever we deemed it safe, we came down to the sea-shore or to the bank of some river; but if there was the slightest suspicion of danger, we ascended to the highlands at once, carefully avoiding the outposts, which are stationed at irregular intervals. In some places they are posted fifteen and in others perhaps fifty versts apart. So irregular were the intervals, it was impossible to divine

their location. But the Lord was merciful to us; and we escaped all of them, until we came to the very last one."

VI.

Here the narrator frowned, and relapsed into silence. After a while he rose.

"But how did it end?" I inquired.

"It seems to me that my horse must be dry by this time. . . . I must unfasten him."

We went out into the yard. The frost had diminished, and the fog was lifted. The vagrant looked at the sky.

"It must be after midnight," he said, gazing at the stars. Divested of the veil of fog, the yourts of the neighboring settlement had now become plainly visible. The village was sleeping. White columns of smoke rose leisurely and indolently into the air; only now and then from some chimney a shower of sparks suddenly flew up, madly leaping in the frosty air. The Yakúts keep their fires going all night, for the heat escapes quickly from their short, open chimneys, and it is the habit of each person

who chances to wake, made restless perhaps by the cold, to throw on fresh logs.

The vagrant remained silent for some time, gazing at the village.

"This reminds me of our villages," he said, with a sigh. "It is a long time since I have seen one. The Yakúts in their districts live apart, like wild beasts. . . . I wish I could move to this part of the country. I might perhaps endure life here."

"Can't you endure it in your own district? You have a farm there, I think. You said, just now, that you were satisfied with your life."

For some time he made no reply.

"I cannot bear it! I wish I might never see this country again!"

He went up to his horse, felt of his neck, and patted him. The intelligent animal turned his head and neighed.

"All right, all right!" said Vasíli, caressingly; "you may go now. . . . I intend racing with the Tartars," he continued; "he is a good horse. I have trained him so that he can compete with any of them. He goes like the wind."

He took off the bridle, and the horse trotted off to the hay. We returned to the yourt.

Vasíli's face was still gloomy. He seemed to have forgotten or perhaps was unwilling to continue his story; but I reminded him of it, saying that I was anxious to hear the end.

"There is not much to tell," he replied, reluctantly, "and what is the use? It is a sad story; but, as I began it, I suppose I may as well finish it. . . . We travelled in this way twelve days longer, and still we had not reached the end of Saghálin, whereas we ought to have crossed to the Amúr by the eighth day, and all this was due to lack of confidence in our leader. Instead of going by the easier way wherever it were possible, we travelled across the highlands, sometimes through ravines, sometimes plunging into the depths of forests, now crossing barren spots, now forcing our way through thickets. . . . It was slow work. Our provisions were nearly exhausted, for we had only taken food enough to last twelve days. . . . We had to cut down our rations. The supply of biscuits grew short,

and every one had in a measure to provide for himself. Berries, however, were plenty, and finally we reached an estuary of the sea. The water was naturally salt; but when, at times, the flow of the Amúr rushed in greater volume than usual, it became fresh. Well, now we had to think of providing boats to cross to the Amúr side. We were anxiously talking over our plans, and wanted Burán to advise us. The old man had weakened perceptibly; . . . his eyes had grown dim, day by day he lost flesh, and we could get no advice from him. 'Get the boats from the Ghiláks,' he said; but where to find the Ghiláks, or how to obtain the boats, he seemed unable to tell. So Volóydka and I said to the boys: 'You had better remain here, and we will follow the shore, and may possibly chance to fall in with some of the natives and to obtain one or two boats. In the meantime, be on your guard, for there must be an outpost somewhere near by.'

"Most of the boys remained behind, while three of us, following the shore, went on. After a while we came out upon a cliff that overhung the river, on the banks of which we

saw a Ghilák mending his sails. God must have sent Orkún to us."

"What does 'Orkún' mean? Was that his name?" I inquired.

"I am sure, I don't know," replied Vasíli. "It may have been his name, but I think that in the Ghilák language it means 'stárosta' — I am not positive. I only know that, as we approached him cautiously lest he might run away, he pointed to himself, repeating: 'Orkún, Orkún'; but what 'Orkún' meant, we did not understand. However, we spoke to him. Volóydka took a stick and drew a boat on the sand, as much as to say, 'This is what we need.' The Ghilák understood him at once; he nodded, and raised his fingers — two at first, then five, then the whole ten. For a long time we could not understand what he meant; but at last Makárof guessed.

"'He wants to know how many there are of us, and what kind of boat we need?'

"'Oh, yes! of course, that is what he means!' and we made signs to the Ghilák that there were twelve of us. He nodded again, so as to let us know that he understood that also.

Then he asked us to take him to the rest of our party. We hesitated; — and yet what was there to be done? We could not cross the sea on foot, so we carried him back with us.

"Our comrades blamed us. 'Why did you bring this Ghilák here? Do you want to betray us?' But what could we have done? 'Keep still!' we replied; 'we are managing this business!' Meanwhile, the Ghilák was walking calmly about, examining our coats. We gave him all the extra ones, which he strapped up, and, shouldering them, started on his way, and we, as a matter of course, followed him. A few Ghilák yourts stood below, forming a sort of settlement.

"'What are we to do now, boys? He has gone to the village to call out the inhabitants.'

"'What of that!' we said. 'There are but four yourts in all; how many people can there be, do you suppose! There are twelve of us, and our knives are three-quarters of an arshín long . . . besides, the Ghiláks are not equal to Russians in strength. They live on fish, and we live on bread. How much strength can any one gain living on such food! They are not

to be compared with us!' But, to tell the truth, I too was somewhat alarmed lest misfortune should befall us. I thought to myself, 'We have reached the end of Saghálin; will it ever be our luck to cross to the Amúr side, looming up with its blue mountains in the distance? If only it were possible to become a bird and fly across! But "though the elbow is near, one cannot bite it."' *

"After we had waited for some time, we saw a party of Ghiláks coming toward us, with Orkún at the head; all were armed with spears. 'You see,' said the boys, 'the Ghiláks are coming to fight.' — 'Well, let them come. Get your knives ready, boys, and don't let yourselves be taken without a struggle. Stand on your guard! Not a man must be taken alive! If one is to be killed, it cannot be helped, — that's his fate; but stand up and defend yourselves as long as you have breath in your body! Let us escape or perish together! Make a bold stand, boys!'

"We suspected the Ghiláks without any cause. When Orkún saw that we were pre-

* Russian proverb. — Tr.

paring to defend ourselves against an attack, he disarmed his people, giving all the spears to one man, and thus approached us. When we became convinced that the Ghiláks were dealing honorably with us, we went with them to the spot where their boats were hauled up, ready for us. There were two of them, of different sizes. The larger boat would hold eight, and the rest of the party were to go in a small one.

"The boats were ours; but we could not cross at present, for the wind had sprung up from the direction of the Amúr, and large waves were dashing on our shore. In rough weather it would be impossible to cross in such boats, and we therefore were obliged to remain on shore two days longer.

"Meanwhile, the provisions gave out, and, beside the fish that Orkún had kindly given us, we had nothing but berries to keep us alive. This lasted us four days. A worthy and honest Ghilák was Orkún; I often think of him now, God bless him!

"Another day passed, and still the wind prevented us from starting. It was a great disap-

pointment. The night wore away, and yet the wind had not abated; it was hard to bear! During these four windy days the Amúr shore stood out clearer than ever, for the fog had entirely disappeared. All this time, Burán remained seated on a rock, his eyes fixed on the opposite shore. He neither spoke nor did he, like the others, go in search of berries. Whenever one of us, taking pity on him, brought him berries, he ate them, but would not take the trouble to get them for himself. It may have been that the heart of the old man was sick with longing, or perhaps he was conscious of the approach of death.

"Finally, our patience was exhausted, and we made up our minds that when night came on we would start. Not daring to run the risk in the daytime, lest the soldiers from the outpost should perceive us, we thought we might venture by night with less risk of detection, hoping, by God's help, to cross in safety.

"In the straits, the wind blew as hard as ever; white-caps danced here and there, and the sea-gulls shrieked like evil spirits. The

rocky shore groaned as the sea dashed madly against it.

"'Let us lie down and sleep, boys,' I said; 'the moon rises at midnight, and then, by God's help, we will start; that will be no time to rest, and we shall need all our strength for the journey.'

"They heeded my advice, and all threw themselves on the ground. We had selected a place on the shore, near the cliffs, where we could not be seen from below, — trees concealing us. Burán alone did not fall asleep, — he sat watching the west. When we lay down the sun was still high above the horizon, and it was quite early in the evening.

"I made the sign of the cross, listened for a while to the wind whistling through the forest, then dropped asleep. We were off our guard, unconscious that misfortune was about to befall us.

"How long we slept, I cannot say. All at once I heard Burán calling me. I awoke and saw that the sun was about to set, and that the sea had grown calm. Burán, with widely dilated eyes, was standing beside me.

"'Get up; they have come after our souls already . . .' he exclaimed, pointing to the bushes.

"I started, and in the direction towards which he was pointing I saw the soldiers, the nearest one aiming at us, another following him; while three more were running down the hill, pointing their guns at us. I was wide-awake in a moment, and called to the boys. They too woke, and sprang instantly to their feet. The nearest soldier was the only one who had time to fire before we were upon them."

A suppressed emotion choked Vasíli's voice; he hung his head. A partial darkness enveloped the yourt, for he had forgotten to throw in fresh logs.

"I ought not to have told this story," he said.

"Why not? But you must finish it, now that you have begun!"

"Well, there is not much to tell; you can easily guess the rest. There were but five of them, and we were twelve. Besides, they expected to catch us asleep, and shoot us down

like woodcocks; instead of that, we hardly gave them time to combine their forces or to decide what they ought to do. . . . You know, we had long knives. . . . They fired one hasty volley, and missed. . . . Then, as they had started down the hill, they were unable to stop. Would you believe it!" he continued, in a mournful voice, lifting his sad eyes, "they did not even know how to defend themselves — beating the air with their bayonets, as if defending themselves from a pack of hounds, while we beset them like a pack of wolves! . . . One soldier grazed my leg with his bayonet; I stumbled and fell, and he over me, Makárof falling on us both. We got up, — Makárof and I, — but the soldier remained where he fell.

"As I rose, I saw that the last two men had run up the hill. Their officer, Saltánof, was a brave and fearless fellow, whose fame had spread far and wide. Even the Ghiláks feared him as they did the Evil Spirit, and many convicts had been killed by his hand.

"There were two Circassians among us — daring fellows, and as agile as cats. One of

them threw himself on Saltánof. They had met half-way up the hill. Saltánof fired his revolver at him; the Circassian ducked, and both fell to the ground. The other Circassian, thinking that his friend had been killed, threw himself on Saltánof, and we had not time to breathe before, in the twinkling of an eye, he had severed Saltánof's head with his knife.

"He jumped on his feet, . . . grinned, . . . and held the head in the air. . . . We were struck dumb. . . . Shrieking something in his own language, he swung the head around, and tossed it up. . . . It flew high above the trees, and disappeared behind the cliff. . . . We were awe-stricken. . . . We heard the splash as it fell into the sea.

"The last soldier had paused on the hill; we saw him throwing away his musket, and covering his face with his hands as he ran away. We did not pursue him, thinking, 'Escape, poor soul, if you can.' He was the only surviving man on the outpost. There had been twenty of them, but thirteen had gone over to the Amúr side, where the high wind had detained them; and the remaining six were killed.

"All was over, and yet we were frightened. Glancing at each other, we could not at once realize whether it had been a dream or a reality. Just then we heard some one groaning behind us, and under the trees, on the very spot where we had been sleeping, sat Burán, moaning. He had been shot by the first soldier, but did not die till the sun had set behind the hill. We were inexpressibly grieved.

"We went to him and found him sitting under a cedar-tree; his eyes were filled with tears, and, pressing his hands to his chest, he beckoned to me.

"'Let the boys dig a grave for me,' he said. 'You cannot start before night, at any rate, on account of the danger of meeting the rest of the soldiers in the straits. Bury me here, for Christ's sake!'

"'Hush, hush, uncle Burán! God bless you!' I said. 'How can we dig a grave for a living man? We will take you across to the Amúr, and then carry you in our arms.'

"'No, my boy; it is useless to contend with fate, and I am sure it is my fate to remain on

this island. So you had better do as I say, for I have long felt that this was going to happen. All my life I have tried to escape from Siberia into Russia; I wish I could, at least, die on Siberian soil, and not on this cursed island.'

"I confess that Burán took me entirely by surprise; for now he spoke sensibly, quite like a different being, and seemed fully conscious. His eyes looked bright; his voice only sounded weak. He gathered us about him and gave us the following instructions: —

"'Listen to me, boys, and remember what I tell you; you will not have me with you when you travel through Siberia, since it is my fate to remain here. It will be dangerous business for you, the more so for having killed Saltánof. The report of this deed will travel far. It will be known not only in Irkútsk but throughout Russia; and in Nikoláevsk they will be on the watch for you. Be on your guard, boys; travel cautiously; rather suffer cold and hunger than run the risk of capture; avoid cities and villages as much as possible. Do not fear the Ghiláks; they will not harm you. And remember what I am going to tell you about the road

on the Amúr side; a little beyond the town of Nikoláevsk lives our benefactor, the clerk of Merchant Tarkhánof. He traded formerly with the Ghiláks on the island of Saghálin, and once while travelling with his merchandise he lost his way in the mountains. He was not then on good terms with the Ghiláks. Overtaking him in an unfrequented spot in the ravine, they nearly killed him.

"'We happened to be tramping about the same time. . . . I was escaping for the first time. . . . Hearing the cries of a Russian in the woods, we hurried to his rescue, and, by delivering him from the hands of the Ghiláks, won his lasting gratitude.

"'"I must take care of the Saghalinian boys to my dying day," he said, and, indeed, he has helped us a great deal. Find him, and he will be sure to assist you in every way he can.' Then he told us of the different roads, giving us all the necessary directions, and finally said: —

"'Now, boys, you had better lose no time. This spot suits me; dig my grave here, Vasíli, that the wind from the Amúr shore may blow

over my grave, and that my spirit may hear the sound of the sea dashing against the rocks. Don't tarry, boys, but make haste and go to work.'

"We obeyed him.

"There, under the cedar-tree, sat the old man while we were digging his grave with our knives; after we had finished, a prayer was read. In the meantime, Burán had become silent, only nodding his head, while tears ran down his cheeks. He died at sunset, and shortly after dark we buried him.

"The moon had risen as we reached the middle of the straits, and it was quite light. We looked back and took off our caps. . . . Behind us rose the island of Saghálin, with its hills, and we saw the cedar-tree by Burán's grave.

VII.

"When we reached the Amúr shore, the Ghiláks said to us: 'Saltánof . . . head . . . water. . . .' The natives are shrewd; the magpies, so to speak, carry news on their tails.

No matter what happens, they are sure to hear of it at once. We met several of them by the shore, fishing, who nodded laughingly at us. Evidently, they too were pleased; but we thought to ourselves, It is very well for you to laugh, you imps, while we have to suffer for it. That head may cost us our own! They gave us fish, and, after inquiring about the way, we started on, walking as though we were treading on eggs, every sound startling us. All the time we were on the lookout, avoiding dwellings and the Russian huts, and concealing our tracks as we went on.

"We travelled by night, resting all day in the woods. At dawn we reached Tarkhánof's place. A new house stood in the field; it was fenced in, and the gates were closed. Judging from the description that it was the one Burán had told us about, we approached and knocked softly. Some one was starting a fire inside. 'Who is there, and whence do you come?' a man's voice called out.

"'We are vagrants,' we replied. 'Burán sends his regards to Stakhéy Mítritch.'

"Stakhéy Mítritch, Tarkhánof's head clerk,

happened to be away at this time, and in his absence had left his assistant in charge, telling him, in case any vagrants should arrive from Saghálin, to provide them with boots and sheepskin coats, and to give them five rubles apiece. Furthermore, to furnish them with as much linen and provisions as they required. 'No matter how many there may be, provide enough for all. Get your workmen together as witnesses, so that your accounts will be in proper shape.'

"The news of Saltánof's fate had reached here also, and the clerk was frightened when he saw us.

"'Are you the men who killed Saltánof?' he said. 'You will have to look out for yourselves.'

"'Whether we did or not, that is not the subject we wish to discuss. What we would like to know is whether we can expect any assistance from you. We are requested to convey Burán's regards to Stakhéy Mítritch.'

"'And where is Burán himself? Did he return to the island?'

"'Yes, he returned to the island, and he wishes you a long life.' *

"'May he inherit the kingdom of heaven! . . . He was a worthy vagrant, although perhaps not very shrewd. Stakhéy Mítritch often spoke of him. I dare say, he will have his name put down for prayers. What was his Christian name? Do you know, boys?'

"'No, we do not. He was always called Burán. Most likely, he had forgotten it himself; of what use is a name to a vagrant?'

"'Now you see the result of such a life as yours! Is it not sad that when the priest wishes to pray for you he cannot utter your name. . . . The old man may have had relations in his native land, . . . brothers and sisters, or perhaps even children. . . .'

"'Very likely. Though a vagrant discards his name, he is born into the world like the rest of humanity. . . .'

"'A hard life, indeed!'

"'None worse. We beg the food that we eat and wear clothes discarded like our own

* To wish one a long life means that the person from whom the wish is supposed to come is dead. — TR.

names. Nor is every vagrant fortunate enough to be buried. If he should happen to die in the wilderness, his body would become a prey for birds or beasts. . . . Even his bones are liable to be scattered by the wolves. What could be harder!'

"Such talk made us sad, . . . and, though we had said all these things chiefly to touch the sympathy of the clerk, — since the more pitiful the story, the more the Siberian is likely to give you, — we knew very well that we had given a true and unvarnished account of ourselves. We could not help thinking how this man, after hearing our sad story, would make the sign of the cross and go to bed . . . in warmth and comfort, he had no one to fear! . . . Whereas we should have to wander in the woods at dead of night, and, like swamp-imps, hide from all Christians at the first crowing of the cock.

"'Well, boys,' the clerk said at last, 'it is time for me to go to bed. I will give you twenty kopeks extra; take it and go your way. I shall not wake all the workmen, but I will call three of my most reliable ones as witnesses.

I suspect I shall get myself into trouble on your account.

"'Now, look out. I advise you to avoid Nikoláevsk. I was there not long ago; the isprávnik * is an energetic man, and has issued orders to detain all travellers, no matter where they happen to be found. He is reported to have said: "I will not let a magpie fly by nor a rabbit pass nor a beast escape me! much less will I suffer those Saghalinian fellows to slip through my fingers." You will be lucky if you manage to elude him; and be sure on no account to enter the town.'

"He gave us the usual quantity of provision, including fish, also the twenty kopeks which he had promised. Then he made the sign of the cross, went into the house, and locked the door. The fire went out, and the men went to bed. It was but a short time before dawn when, with heavy hearts, we started once more on our journey.

"How often have we felt thus! On dark nights, in deep forests, drenched by the rain, buffeted by the wind, with no spot on earth

* The district chief of police. — Tr.

where we could seek refuge or shelter! . . . Still, one longs to see one's mother-country. And yet, if ever a man reaches it, — where every dog knows him to be a vagrant, and where officials are vigilant and numerous, — how long do you suppose he would remain at large in his own native place? . . . The prison awaits him! . . . At times even the thought of a prison was a comfort, and that's a fact! So it was on that night as we walked along.

"'I wonder what our folks are doing now, boys!' suddenly exclaimed Volóydka.

"'Whom do you mean?' I asked.

"'I mean the Saghalinians, our comrades of barrack No. 7. I suppose they are sleeping just now, free from care! And here are we poor wretches. . . . We ought not to have started. . . .'

"'Don't be like an old woman,' I replied, pretending to be angry. 'It would have been better if you had remained there, since you are so short-breathed, for you only distress us with your whining.'

"Yet I felt very much the same myself. We were weary, and dozed as we trudged along.

A vagrant acquires the habit of taking naps when on his feet, and whenever I dozed I invariably dreamt of the barracks. . . . It seemed to me as if the moon were shining, and I saw the walls glittering in its light; I dreamed, too, that I saw the barred windows, and, behind them, the convicts sleeping in their rows of bunks. Then, again, I dreamed that I also was lying there, and stretching myself . . . but when I made the motion, the dream vanished.

"What is more painful for the vagrant than to dream of his father and mother? In my dream, it was as if nothing had ever happened to me, as though neither prison nor Saghálin had ever existed; it seemed as if I were lying in my parents' house, and my mother, softly humming, were combing and smoothing my hair. A candle stood on the table, and my father, with spectacles on his nose, was reading an ancient book . . . he was a book-keeper. . . .

"Arousing from my doze, I felt as if I could have stabbed myself then and there. Instead of home, I saw a narrow forest-path; Makárof

was walking ahead, and we were following him in single file.

"Fitful gusts of wind rose every now and then, swaying the branches, and, again subsiding, left everything silent as before. Through the trees, in the distance, we caught glimpses of the sea, and above it a bit of the sky, showing the first faint vestige of dawn, a warning for us to hide in some ravine. The sea is never, never silent; you may have noticed that yourself. It always seems to be talking, or singing, or murmuring something. . . . It was this that made me dream ever of songs. The sea always made us feel homesick . . . because we were not used to it, I suppose. As we approached Nikoláevsk, the country grew more thickly settled, and our danger increased; but we still pushed slowly along. We travelled by night, and by day hid in thickets, so dense that beast or bird could hardly have penetrated, far less a human being. We ought to have avoided the city of Nikoláevsk; but we were exhausted, wandering in the wilderness, and our provisions were nearly out. One evening, toward night, we reached the river, and per-

ceived some people on the banks. As we drew near, we recognized them to be the 'Free Company.'* They were seining. We approached in an easy, self-composed manner.

"'How do you do, gentlemen of the Free Company!'

"'How do you do!' they replied. 'Where do you hail from?'

"By degrees we entered into conversation with them. Their stárosta, after looking at us attentively, called me aside and said: —

"'Are you not the men from Saghálin? Is it you who have "covered" Saltánof?'

"I must confess I was in doubt whether it would be wise to tell him the truth; for, though he was a fellow-convict, yet, in a matter such as this, I hesitated to confide in any one. If one stops to consider, a Free Company is a very different matter from an ordinary convict artél; for, should any of them wish to curry favor with the officials, he could secretly

* A "Free Company" is composed of convicts who have served their sentence. They no longer live in prison, but are quartered in the town, though both their labor and their persons are still under a certain control, and they are subjected to rules and regulations. — *Author's note.*

report us, — for was he not a 'free man'? Inside the prison-walls, we were acquainted with all the spies; whenever we were betrayed, we knew at once whom to suspect. Here we were at the mercy of all.

"Noticing my hesitation, he added: 'Have no fear; I would not betray a comrade! Moreover, it is none of my business; I take your word for it. Only, as I had heard that a crime had been committed on Saghálin, and as there are eleven of you, I suspected it. This is a dangerous business, boys; it was a bold deed, and our isprávnik is a shrewd one, I assure you. But, then, that's your own lookout. You will be lucky if you succeed in getting away. Now, let me offer you some provisions belonging to the artél, which were left over; you are welcome to them, as we are to return to-night. You can also have what bread there is left, and some fish. Don't you need a kettle?'

"'An extra one might come handy.'

"'Take the one that belongs to our artél. I will bring you more things in the night, for I always feel it my duty to help a comrade.'

"We were much relieved. I took off my hat

and bowed to this kind-hearted man. My comrades also thanked him. . . . We were glad to receive the provisions, but still better pleased to hear a kind word. Until now we had held aloof from all, being well aware that death was the only thing we could expect from any man; and these men pitied us. In our joy, we nearly got ourselves into trouble.

"After they had left us, our boys grew more cheerful, and Volóydka even began to dance. We forgot our anxiety, and, on entering a deep valley, near the river-bank, called Dickman's Valley, after a German steamship-owner by the name of Dickman, who built his steamers there, we made a fire, and hung the two kettles over it. In one we made tea, and in the other fish-chowder. By that time it was nearly night, and soon after it grew quite dark, and rain began to fall; but as we were sitting by the fire, drinking tea, it did not trouble us much.

"There we sat chatting, as snug and comfortable as one could wish, not dreaming that, since we could distinguish the city lights, our fire also might be visible to the inhabitants. That shows how careless we sometimes become.

When we travelled in the woods and mountains, we feared every noise, and here, in sight of the city itself, we had built a fire, and sat around it, chatting as unconcernedly as possible.

"Luckily for us, an old officer, who for many years had been superintendent of one of the Siberian prisons, was then living in the city. The prison was a large one, and many men had been confined there at different times, every one of whom spoke well of this old gentleman. Everybody in Siberia knew Samárof; and when I heard, not long ago, that he was dead, I took pains to go to the priest, and paid him fifty kopeks to have his name mentioned in the prayers for the dead. He was a good old man! May he inherit the kingdom of heaven! . . . Only, he would use the most abusive language. Such a spitfire as he was! He would storm and rage, stamping, and shaking his fists; but nobody feared him. All tried to please him, for he was a just man. It cannot be said that he ever abused or imposed on any one, or that he ever took a kopek of the artél's money, except what was freely given him for his kindness. For, as he had a large family, the con-

victs always remembered him, . . . and from them he derived a good income. At the time of which I am speaking, he was already on the retired list, and lived quietly in Nikoláevsk, in a house of his own. Still, for old memory's sake, he took an interest in us, and that evening, while sitting on the porch of his house, smoking a pipe, he saw a fire in Dickman's Valley.

"'I wonder who started that fire?' he thought to himself.

"Just then three men belonging to the Free Company happened to be passing by. Hailing them, he said: —

"'Where did your company fish to-day? Can it be that they are in Dickman's Valley?'

"'No, your honor,' they replied. 'They must be farther up. Besides, they are expected to return to-night.'

"'So I thought. . . . Do you see that fire beyond the river?'

"'Yes.'

"'Who do you suppose it can be?'

"'We couldn't tell, Stepán Savélyitch. Vagrants perhaps.'

"'Vagrants, . . . do you say! . . . and you

have not the sense to take thought for your comrades. . . . It is I who must think for all. . . . Haven't you heard what the isprávnik said the other day about the Saghalinians—that they had been seen not very far off. . . . I wonder if the fools could have built that fire?'

"'Very likely, Stepán Savélyitch. It would not surprise us if it were they.'

"'If that is so, they had better look out. The idea of doing such a thing as that, the rascals! I wonder if the isprávnik is in town. If he has not returned, he will be here shortly. When he sees their fire, he will send out a company at once. What is to be done? I pity those rascals; their heads will surely pay the price for Saltánof's. Get the boat ready, boys!'

"Meanwhile we sat by the fire, waiting for the chowder to be ready, for it was a long time since we had tasted any hot food. It was a dark night. Clouds rose seaward. It rained, and the forest moaned; but we were happy. . . . The dark night is a kind mother to the like of us vagrants. The cloudier the sky, the easier we feel.

"Suddenly one of the Tartars pricked up his ears. Those Tartars are ever on the alert, like cats. I listened also, and distinguished the sound of oars. Going up to the shore, I saw a boat stealthily creeping along under the steep bank. I could see the men who were rowing it, and the faint glimmer of a cockade on the hat of the one at the rudder.

"'Boys, we are lost,' I said; 'it's the isprávnik!'

"The men sprang to their feet, upsetting the kettles, and ran for the woods. . . . I bade the boys keep together, and wait for the result. Perhaps we might have a chance to get the upper hand if there were but few of them. We hid behind the trees, and waited to see what would come next. The boat landed, and five men stepped on shore. One of them exclaimed, laughing:—

"'Why did you run away, you fools? I know a word that will bring you all out; I must say you are brave fellows, to run like rabbits.'

"Dáryin, who was sitting beside me, under a cedar-tree, whispered:—

"'I say, Vasíli, this is strange! The isprávnik's voice seems very familiar to me.'

"'Keep still,' I said; 'let us see what they will do next. There are only a few of them.'

"One of the oarsmen, stepping out, asked:—

"'Here, don't be afraid of us! Do you know any one in this prison?'

"We held our breath and made no reply. 'What the deuce is the matter with you?' the same voice called out again. 'Answer, do you know any one in this prison? Perhaps you may recognize some of us.'

"I replied: 'Whether we know each other or not is of no consequence. Perhaps it would be better had we never met, for we are not to be taken alive.'

"I meant this for a signal to my comrades to be ready.

"As to numbers we had the advantage, since there were but five of them; but we feared that as soon as they began to fire, the shots would be heard in town. However, it made no difference; we were determined not to be taken without a struggle.

"Again the old man spoke: 'Boys,' he said, 'is it possible that none of you know Samárof?'

"Dáryin nudged me. 'Sure enough, it is the superintendent of the N. prison! Your honor,' he said, 'do you remember Dáryin?'

"'To be sure, I do; he used to be my stárosta in N. I think his name was Fedót.'

"'That's me, your honor. Come out, boys; this is our father.'

"Whereupon we all came forth.

"'Can it be possible that your honor has come to arrest us? We can't believe it.'

"'I pitied you, for being such fools. How very clever, to build a fire directly opposite the town!'

"'We were wet, your honor; it rained.'

"'R-a-i-n-e-d! And yet you pretend to call yourselves vagrants. You'll not melt. You may thank your stars that I came out on the porch to smoke my pipe before the isprávnik returned. If he had seen your fire, he would have found a dry place for you! you are not very shrewd, boys, even if you did get the bet-

ter of Saltánof, rascals that you are! Now, make haste, put out the fire and get away from here, into the valley; you may build ten fires there if you like, you scoundrels!'

"So the old gentleman scolded, while we stood around him, listening smilingly. Finally he stopped, and said: —

"'Now, listen to what I have to tell you. I have brought you some bread and three bricks of tea, and all I ask of you is to remember old Samárof kindly; and if you are lucky enough to escape, one of you may chance to go to Tobólsk — if so, put a candle before my patron saint in the cathedral. I shall probably die here — it is my home, and, besides, I am getting old; but still I often think of my own country. Well, good-by; and take another piece of advice — divide yourselves into small parties. How many are there of you?'

"'Eleven,' we replied.

"'Who could help calling you fools! Probably by this time they have heard all about you at Irkútsk, and yet you still travel in a body!'

"After the old gentleman got into the boat

and left us, we moved farther away into the valley, boiled our tea, made the chowder, and, taking the old man's advice, we divided the provisions and separated.

"Dáryin and I kept together, Makárof went with the Circassians, the Tartar joined the two vagrants, and the remaining three formed another party. From this time forth we never met again. I do not know whether my former comrades are dead or alive. I have heard that the Tartar was sent here, but I don't know whether it is true.

"That same night, just before dawn, Dáryin and I crept past Nikoláevsk. Only one dog barked, from a house in the outskirts.

"By sunrise, having travelled ten versts through the woods, we drew near the road, and, hearing the jingling of a bell, crouched behind the bushes, and saw the isprávnik driven by in a post-cart. He was wrapped in a great-coat, and was dozing. Dáryin and I made the sign of the cross. What a mercy that he was out of town the previous night! He may have gone out in pursuit of us."

VIII.

The fire on the hearth had died out; but the yourt was still as warm as an oven. The ice on the windows was melting, and we came to the conclusion that it must be growing warmer outside, for in severe frosts the ice does not melt even from the inside, no matter how warm the yourt may be. Hence we did not replenish the fire, and I went out to close the chimney.

I found that the fog had disappeared and the air had grown softer. In the north, over the brow of the dark, heavily wooded hills, rose faint, fleecy clouds, hurrying swiftly across the sky. One might imagine an invisible giant gently sighing in the dark, cold night; his broad chest pouring forth its steaming breath, to be wafted across the sky and vanish at last in the blue ether. There was a faint playing of the Northern Lights.

Yielding to its melancholy witchery, I stood pensively upon the roof, watching the ever changing rays. The night showed forth in all its cold and dreary beauty. Overhead, the

stars were glimmering, while the snowy shroud below gradually faded away in the dim distance. The forest looked like a long black comb, and the distant hills took on a pale blue tinge. This cold and silent picture filled my soul with a gentle sadness, and through the air, in soft vibrations, the words, "Far! so far!" seemed echoing in a minor chord.

When I returned into the hut, I could tell by the steady, regular breathing of the vagrant that he was asleep. I also tried to sleep, but could not, owing to the effect his exciting tale had produced upon me. At times, when sleep nearly overtook me, it would seem as if he purposely tossed and rolled, softly muttering in his sleep. His deep chest-tones dispelled my drowsiness, and in my fevered imagination arose the panorama of his Odyssey. Then, again, forgetting where I was, it seemed as though the boughs of the larch and the cedar waved overhead. I fancied myself gazing from a high cliff, and saw, in the ravine below, the white houses of the outposts, over which a mountain-eagle soared majestically. In fancy I wandered farther and farther from the hope-

less gloom of my small yourt. A fresh breeze seemed to fan my brow, and in my ears echoed the faint murmur of the ocean. The sun was setting, and in the gathering darkness my boat rocked gently on the rippling straits. I was deeply excited by the story of the young vagrant.

What an impression this vagrant epic must make when told in the stifling atmosphere that fills the four walls of convict prison barracks. And what was there in this story, I asked myself, that made such an impression upon my whole being? It was not the difficulties overcome on the way, nor the sufferings endured, nor that "vagrant homesickness"; but it was the incomparable poetry of liberty. And why was it that I heard only the voice of freedom as expressed in the measureless expanse, in the woods, in the steppes, and in the ocean? If this so strongly appealed to me, how much more so to the vagrant, who had already tasted the poisoned cup of unsatisfied desire. He was still sleeping, while my excited imagination allowed me no rest. I cared nothing for the cause of his banishment, for his

past life, or for his deeds since he ceased "to obey his parents." In him I saw only a young life, full of strength, of energy, and of a passionate longing for freedom. . . . Whither, yes, whither?

In his scarce audible mutterings, I fancied I heard sighs. I forgot myself under the pressure of the unsolved question, and gloomy dreams hovered around me. . . . The evening sun had set, and all the sad, infinite world seemed plunged in gloomy thought. Heavy clouds hung overhead. . . . The horizon alone was illuminated by the last vestiges of the dying day, and somewhere, far, far away, under the shadow of the purple hills, flickered a light. What was it? — the familiar flame on the hearth of the long-forsaken home, or a will-o'-the-wisp dancing over the darkness of a grave?

It was very late when at last I fell asleep.

IX.

When I awoke it must have been about eleven o'clock. The rays of the sun streamed

through the windows of the yourt, playing on the floor. The vagrant had departed. Having to go to the village on business, I harnessed my horse, and started in my little sleigh along the village street. It was a bright and comparatively warm day. The mercury may have stood at twenty degrees.* But . . . everything in this world is relative; such weather as is usual in midwinter in other lands is regarded here as the first sign of spring. The clouds of smoke rising simultaneously from the chimneys did not remain stationary in immovable columns, as they do in severe frosts, but inclined to the west, and an east wind was blowing, bringing with it a warmer breeze from the Pacific Ocean.

The village was settled principally by banished Tartars, and, as it was a holiday, the streets presented an animated appearance. Gates creaked, sleighs issued forth, and tipsy riders were a common sight. The worshippers of Mahomet are not rigid observers of the laws of the Koran, and both riders and pedes-

* By the Réaumur thermometer, used throughout Russia. — Tr.

trians at times described the most fantastic curves. Occasionally a startled horse would make a sudden leap, upsetting the sleigh, and tearing along the village street, while the owner, clinging obstinately to the reins, was dragged behind, raising a perfect cloud of snow. It might happen to any one to lose control over a horse, or to fall out of the sleigh, but even in such critical circumstances it was considered a disgrace for a "true Tartar" to loose his hold of the reins.

A moment later, the straight, arrow-like street assumed an unusually bustling appearance. The riders kept close to the fences, the pedestrians fell back, and the gayly dressed women in their bright *chadrys* * hurried their children into the houses. Interested spectators crowded the streets, and all eyes were turned in one direction. At the further end of the narrow street a group of riders appeared, and for the first time I saw the races, of which both Tartars and Yakúts are so fond. There were about five riders, galloping like the wind; and, as the group approached, I saw Bagylái's

* A Tartar head-dress. — *Author's note.*

gray horse. With every stroke of his hoofs he increased the distance that separated him from the rest. A moment later, they had all passed me like a whirlwind.

The eyes of the Tartars glistened with fiendish excitement. As they rode by, they shouted, waving their hands and leaning backwards, sitting well back on their horses. Vasíli alone rode Russian fashion, bending closely to his horse's neck, and occasionally giving a short, shrill whistle, that sounded like the lash of a whip. His gray horse was straining every nerve, cutting the air like a flying bird.

The sympathy of the crowd was, as usual, with the victor.

"Well done!" cried the delighted spectators; and the old horse-thieves, passionate lovers of such sport, bobbed up and down, clapping their hands on their knees, as they beat time to the galloping of the horses.

As Vasíli returned on his foam-flecked horse, he overtook me half-way up the street. His outstripped rivals were far behind.

The vagrant's face looked pale, but his eyes

glowed with excitement; it was evident that he had been drinking.

"I'm on a spree," he shouted, waving his hat as he bowed.

"That's no affair of mine."

"Well, don't get angry. I can drink and yet keep my wits about me. By the way, do not give up my saddle-bags under any pretext whatsoever — not even to me, if I should ask for them. — You understand?"

"I understand," I coolly replied. "Only, please don't visit me when you are drunk."

"You need have no fear; I shall not come," he said, as he gave his horse a cut with the end of the rein. The horse snorted, reared, and sprang forward a few yards. Vasíli curbed him, exclaiming: —

"Look at my horse! He is worth his weight in gold. I bet on him! Did you see him go? Now the Tartars will give me whatever I ask for him, without doubt, because they passionately adore a good horse."

"Why do you sell him? What will you have to work with?"

"I can't help it; it's fate!"

Again he lashed the horse and curbed him in.

"To tell the truth, 'tis because I have met a comrade here; I will give up everything. Look, my dear fellow, do you see that Tartar on the roan horse, coming this way? Here!" he called out to the Tartar, "Akhmétka, come here!"

The roan horse, arching his neck and prancing, trotted up to my sleigh; the rider took off his hat and bowed, smiling. I looked at him with curiosity.

Akhmétka's mischievous face was wreathed in a broad smile; his small eyes sparkled merrily, as he gazed on Vasíli with roguish familiarity, a glance that seemed to say to every one, "We understand each other. I'm a rogue, to be sure, but a sharp one." His interlocutor, looking at his face with its high cheek-bones, its merry wrinkles about the eyes, the large, thin ears that stood out so comically, involuntarily smiled also. Then Akhmétka, concluding that matters were amicable, nodded his head with a satisfied look, as much as to say, "Now we understand each other."

"A comrade," he said, nodding towards Vasíli; "we tramped together."

"Where do you live?" I inquired. "I never saw you before in the village."

"I've come for my papers. I've been carrying wine to the gold-mines." *

I looked at Vasíli; he dropped his eyes and gathered up the reins. Then, raising his head, he gazed at me defiantly. His lips were tightly compressed, but the lower one trembled perceptibly.

"I will go with him into the forest! Why do you look at me so strangely? I'm a vagrant! a vagrant!"

He was already on the gallop even as he uttered the last words. For one moment a

* Liquor traffic is strictly forbidden at the gold-mines or in their immediate vicinity; consequently, about the tributaries of the Lena, where the mines are situated, an unlawful business has sprung up, that of carrying spirits to the miners, who exchange for it gold. This is dangerous traffic, for, if caught, one is sentenced to hard labor, and, in this locality, it is carried on under many and great difficulties. Some carriers perish in the forest from privations, some are shot down by Cossacks, others die by the hands of their own comrades; but, to compensate for all this, the profit is enormous, much more than a man could make by mining. — *Author's note.*

cloud of frosty dust was visible in the street, then nothing was to be seen or heard but the clatter of the horse's hoofs.

A year later Akhmétka again returned to the settlement for the "papers," but Vasíli was seen no more.

SKETCHES OF A SIBERIAN TOURIST.

THE CORMORANTS.

As I reached the ferry in my post-horse tróïka,* it was already growing dark. A brisk and piercing wind rippled the surface of the broad and turbid river, splashing its waves against the steep banks. As the distant sound of the tinkling post-bells reached the ears of the ferry-men, they stopped the ferry-boat and waited for us. Brakes were put on the wheels, the telyéga † was driven down-hill, and the cable unfastened. The waves dashed against the boarded sides of the ferry-boat, the pilot sharply turned the wheel, and the shore gradually receded from us, as though yielding to the pressure of the waves.

There were two telyégas on the ferry-boat, beside ours. In one of them sat an elderly,

* A team with three horses harnessed abreast. — Tr.

† A long, open cart without springs. — Tr.

quiet-looking man, apparently belonging to the merchant class; the other was occupied by three fellows, unmistakably bourgeois. The merchant sat motionless, protecting himself by his collar from the piercing autumnal wind, and heedless of his travelling companions. The bourgeois, on the contrary, were jolly and talkative. One of them, a cross-eyed fellow, with a torn nostril, played the balaláïka* incessantly, singing wild melodies in a harsh voice. But the wind soon dispersed these sharp tones, carrying them hither and thither along the swift and turbid stream. Another, with a brandy-flask and tumbler in his hand, was treating my driver; while the third, a man possibly thirty years of age, a healthy, handsome, and powerfully built fellow, was stretched out in the telyéga, with his hand under his head, pensively watching the gray clouds as they flitted across the sky. In the course of my two days' journey from the city of N., I had frequently encountered the same familiar faces. I was travelling on urgent business, speeding with the utmost haste; but

* An instrument resembling a three-stringed lute. — Tr.

both the merchant, who drove a plump mare, harnessed into a two-wheeled kibítka,* and the bourgeois, with their lean hacks, constantly kept up with me, and after each stopping-place I met them, either on the way or at some ferry.

"Who are these men?" I inquired of my driver, as he approached my telyéga.

"Kostiúshka † and his friends," he replied, with an air of reserve.

"And who are they?" I asked once more, for the name sounded unfamiliar to me.

The driver evidently felt unwilling to give me further particulars, lest our conversation might be overheard by the men. Glancing at them, he hastily pointed with his whip toward the river.

Looking in that direction, I saw that its broad expanse was here and there darkened by the tossing of the turbid waters, and overhead large white birds like gulls soared in widening circles, now and then plunging below the waves, and rising again with a shrill and plaintive cry.

* A covered vehicle used in Siberia. — Tr.

† A diminutive of Constantine. — Tr.

"Cormorants!" the driver remarked, by way of explanation, as soon as the ferry had landed us on the shore, and we had reached the top of the hill.

"Those men are like cormorants," he continued. "They have neither home nor property, for I have heard that they have sold even the land they owned, and now they are scouring the country like wolves. They give us no peace."

"What do you mean? Are they robbers?"

"They are up to all sorts of mischief; cutting off a traveller's valise, or stealing chests of tea from a transport, is their favorite amusement. . . . And if they are hard up, they will not hesitate to steal a horse from us drivers, when we are on our return trip. It often happens that one of us may fall asleep, — every one is liable to that, you know, — and they are always on the lookout. It was a driver who tore this very Kostiúshka's nostril with his whip, and that's a fact! Mark my words, this same Kóyska is the biggest scoundrel! . . . He has no mate now . . . since the transport-drivers killed him. . . ."

"They caught him, then?"

"Yes, they did, in the very act, and they made him pay for his fun. The transport-drivers had their turn, and he gave them plenty of sport."

The speaker chuckled to himself.

"In the first place, they chopped off his fingers, then they singed him, and finally they disembowelled him with a stick. . . . He died, the dog! . . ."

"How comes it that you are acquainted with them? Why did you let them treat you with brandy?"

"I cannot help being acquainted," he replied, gloomily. "I have often had to treat them myself, because I stand in fear of them all the time. . . . Mark my words! Kostiúshka has not come out without a purpose. He would not have driven the horses so far without some object. . . . I can tell you that he scents prey from afar, the devil! I am sure of it! And that merchant, I was just thinking about him," he added thoughtfully, after a short pause; "I wonder if he can be their object? . . . I can hardly believe it; however, they have a

new man with them, whom I never saw before."

"The one who lay stretched out in the telyéga?"

"The very one. . . . He must be an expert . . . a healthy-looking devil! . . .

"Take my advice, sir," he said, suddenly turning toward me; "be on your guard . . . do not travel by night. They may be following you, for all you know, those wretches! . . ."

"Do you know me?" I asked.

He turned away, and affected to play with the reins.

"We are supposed to know nothing," he replied, evasively. "It was rumored that Khoodín's clerk, from the city, was soon to pass this way. . . . But this is no business of ours."

Evidently, I was known here. I had been retained in a lawsuit brought by the firm of Koodín against the government, and had just won it. My patrons were very popular in these places, and in all Western Siberia, and the suit had made a great sensation. Having recently received a very large sum of money, I was hastening to the city of N., where I had to meet

some payments which were due. I had very little time to spare, the postal communications were irregular, and therefore I carried the money on my own person. I travelled night and day — sometimes leaving the highway, when I could gain time by taking a short cut. In view of the rumors that had spread concerning me, which were calculated to excite myriads of hungry cormorants, I was beginning to feel somewhat anxious.

As I glanced behind me, in spite of the gathering darkness, I could easily distinguish the swiftly galloping tróïka, followed at some distance by the merchant's wagonette.

II.

"THE HOLLOW BELOW THE DEVIL'S FINGER."

At the N. post-station, where I arrived in the evening, there were no horses to be found.

"Do take my advice, Iván Seménovitch!" the stout and good-natured station-master entreated me, "and do not travel by night. Never mind your business. One's life is more

precious than other people's money. For miles around the only subjects talked about are your lawsuit and this large sum of money. No doubt, the cormorants will be on the alert. . . . Do spend the night here! . . ."

Of course, I realized all the wisdom of this advice; but, still, I felt that I could not follow it.

"I must go on! . . . Please send for private horses. . . ."

"You are an obstinate man, I must confess; but I will give you a trusty 'friend.'* He will carry you to B., to the Molokán.† But you really must spend the night there. You will have to pass the Devil's Hollow. It is a lonely place, and the people are audacious. . . . Better wait till daylight! . . ."

Half an hour later I sat on my telyéga, listening to the advice and good-wishes of my friend. The willing horses started at once; and the driver, encouraged by the promise of a fee, urged them to their utmost speed. We reached B. in a very short time.

* Name given to drivers of private conveyances in Siberia.
† A religious sect of vegetarians.

"Where will you take me now?" I asked him.

"To my friend the Molokán. He is a trustworthy man."

Passing several huts in the woods, we stopped at the gate of a respectable house, where we were met by a venerable-looking man, with a long gray beard, holding a lantern in his hand; raising it above his head, he scrutinized me for a moment, and then remarked, in a quiet way:

"Ah, Iván Seménovitch! . . . Some fellows who passed, just now, bade me look out for Koodín's clerk, from the city, . . . and get the horses ready for him. . . . And I asked them what business it was of theirs. . . . 'Very likely, he may wish to spend the night,' I said. . . . It is getting late, you know."

"What fellows were they?" interrupted my driver.

"The Lord only knows! Cormorants, most likely! They looked like rascals. . . . I suppose they came from the city; but who they are, I cannot say. Who does know anything about them? . . . But will you spend the night, sir?"

"No, I cannot; and please get horses for me

as quickly as possible!" I said, somewhat uneasy at the rumors that seemed to have preceded me.

"Walk into the hut; it will be more comfortable than to stand here. . . . Really, I have no horses. Yesterday I sent the boy into the city with some goods. What will you do now? You had better sleep here."

My distress at this fresh disappointment was deepened by the darkness and gloom of the stormy autumn night peculiar to Siberia. The sky was so overcast that one could hardly trace the outlines of the heavy clouds, and on the ground a man could not see objects two steps before him. A drizzling rain had begun to fall, and from the woods came a mysterious rustling.

Still, I felt obliged to continue my journey, in spite of all obstacles. Entering the hut, I asked the proprietor to send at once to one of the neighbors to obtain horses.

"I fear you may regret this hurry, my dear sir," said the old man, shaking his gray head. "And such a night as this is!—Egyptian darkness, and nothing less!"

When my driver came in, he and the old

man held a prolonged consultation. At last they both addressed themselves to me, entreating me to remain over night. Still I insisted, and then the two began to whisper together, and I could overhear certain names as they discussed the matter. "Very well, then," said the driver, as though reluctantly yielding to the master of the house, "your horses will be ready for you; I am going now to the clearing."

"Will not that require a long time?—I wish you could find them nearer home. . . ."

"It will not take long," replied the driver, and the master added, in an impatient tone of voice:—

"What's the hurry? You know the saying, 'Haste makes waste.' . . . Plenty of time yet. . . ."

While the driver was making his preparations behind the partition, the master continued his instructions, in the quavering voice of an old man, and I took the chance to doze awhile beside the oven.

"Well, my lad," I heard the master say to him, outside the door, "tell the 'Slayer' to make haste. . . . You see, he is in a hurry."

Presently the sound of galloping was heard. The last words of the old man had dispelled my sleepiness. I seated myself before the fire, and gave myself up to anxious thoughts. The dark night, the unfamiliar surroundings, the strange faces, the unintelligible conversation, and finally the fatal word. . . . My nerves were evidently unstrung.

An hour later, the rapid tinkling of a bell was heard, and the tróïka stopped before the door. I put on my wraps and went out.

The sky had grown clearer. The clouds swept hurriedly along, as though in haste to reach their goal. It had ceased raining, but now and then a large drop fell from the clouds that scurried along in the rising wind.

The master came out with a lantern to see us off, and by its light I scrutinized my new driver. He was a tall, broad-shouldered, and powerful man — quite a giant, in fact. The expression of his face was calm and stern — impressed, so to speak, with the stamp of some past sorrow never to be forgotten, and his eyes had a steadfast and obstinate gaze.

I must admit that for a moment I was over-

come by a strong temptation to dismiss this giant driver, and spend the night in the warm and cheerful chamber of the Molokán. It lasted, however, but for a moment. Clasping my revolver, I seated myself in the cart, while the driver fastened the apron and slowly and deliberately took his seat on the box.

"Look out, 'Slayer!'" was the old man's parting injunction. "Look sharp! You know how it is likely to be! . . ."

"Yes, I know," replied the driver, and we vanished into the gloom of the stormy night.

As we drove past the huts which were scattered at intervals along the road, an occasional light flashed forth, and here and there against the dark background of the woods a grayish smoke, mingled with sparks, curled up into the air, and melted in the darkness. Finally we left the last dwelling behind, and the solitude of the black forest and the gloom of the night deepened around us.

The horses, trotting evenly and swiftly, carried me on toward the fatal hollow; it was now about five versts away, and there was time enough to brood at leisure over my situ-

ation. As often happens in moments of unusual excitement, I had the keenest realization of it; and when I recalled the marauder-like figures of the cormorants, the mysterious merchant who accompanied them, and the unusual pertinacity with which they followed me, I came to the conclusion that some sort of an adventure awaited me in the hollow. But the part that my gloomy driver was to play remained for me like the riddle of Œdipus.

However, the solution was near at hand. Presently, the mountain-chain came in sight, outlined against the background of the clearing sky. Its summit was covered with a forest growth, and at its base one discerned, through the darkness, a flowing stream, over which hung a projecting rock, known as the "Devil's Finger."

The road skirted the river at the foot of the hills. Beneath the Devil's Finger it receded from the mountain-chain, and at this point it was entered by a cross-road, leading from the valley. This was the most dangerous spot, famous as the scene of many daring exploits on the part of the knights of the road in

Siberia. The narrow, rocky road prevented rapid driving, and the bushes might serve to hide an ambush. We were nearing the hollow. The Devil's Finger began to loom up before us, the darkness adding to its actual size, until the clouds, as they passed over it, seemed to graze its summit.

The horses slackened their pace, and the middle horse, as he trotted carefully along, watched the road intently, while the side horses, snorting loudly, pressed more closely against the shafts. The musical sounds of the tinkling bell echoed beyond the river and died away in the sensitive air.

Suddenly the horses stopped; with one abrupt jerk the bell sent forth a tinkling peal and was silent. I rose in my seat. Beside the road, the dark bushes were shaken by the movements of some dusky object.

The driver had reined in his horses just in time to avoid the attack. Still, the situation was critical, for it was impossible either to turn aside or to retreat. I was just about to fire a random shot, when the tall form of the driver, rising from the box, shut from me the road and

the bushes. The "Slayer," as he stepped to the ground, quietly handed the reins to me, saying, as he did so: "Do not fire, but hold the reins."

His tones were so calm, yet so impressive, that it never occurred to me to do otherwise than as I was bidden; my suspicions in his regard were dispelled. I took the reins while the solemn giant advanced towards the bushes. The horses slowly and intelligently followed their master, without any further order.

The rattling of the wheels on the stony road prevented me from hearing what was going on in the bushes. When we came to the place where we had seen the moving object, the "Slayer" stopped.

Nothing was to be heard except the sound of the rustling and cracking branches at a short distance from the road, in the direction of the mountain. Somebody was evidently pushing his way through, and the man in advance seemed in a hurry.

"It is that rascal Kostiúshka, running ahead," said the "Slayer," listening to the sound. "Bah! See! there is one of them left behind, it seems!"

Just then, at a short distance from us, a tall figure darted out of a bush and in again, and now we could hear distinctly the sound of footsteps retreating from the road in four different places. The "Slayer" went up to his horses as quietly as before, arranged the harness, making the bell tinkle as he touched the duga,* and mounted to his seat.

Suddenly, from the rock below the "Finger," there came a flash, followed by a report, startling the silence of the night. We heard something strike against the carriage and then against the bushes.

The "Slayer," dashing towards the bushes like an infuriated wild beast, exclaimed, in an agitated voice: —

"Mind what you do, Kóyska! You had better not fool any more, I warn you! If you had hurt my harmless beasts . . . I should have got even with you, were you to travel a hundred versts! . . . Don't fire, sir!" he added sternly, addressing me.

"You had better look out for *yourself*,

* A wooden arch that rises over the head of the middle horse, and to which a bell is fastened.—TR.

'Slayer,'" answered a voice, that was evidently held in control, and one that did not sound like Kostiúshka's. "Why do you put your nose in other people's business, when you are not wanted?"

The speaker seemed to be afraid of being overheard by others beside the one whom he was addressing.

"I wouldn't threaten if I were you, Your Honor," replied the driver, contemptuously. "I am not afraid of you, though you have made common cause with the cormorants!"

A few minutes later, the hollow beneath the Devil's Finger was left behind, and we were once more following the broad thoroughfare.

III.

"THE SLAYER."

We drove four versts in utter silence; I was meditating on what had just happened, while the driver sat playing with the reins, alternately urging and holding in his horses. I was the first to speak.

"I am greatly obliged to you, my friend! It would have gone ill with me, had it not been for you."

"You owe me no thanks," he replied.

"What do you mean! . . . That was evidently a desperate crowd! . . ."

"That's true. . . ."

"Do you know those men?"

"I know Kostiúshka. . . . But, then, I suppose every dog knows that rascal! . . . The merchant, too, I have seen before . . . but the one who was left behind I don't think I ever saw. . . . Yes, I suppose he relied on Kostiúshka to do the business. . . . No, sir, Kostiúshka is not to be trusted! He is the first one to run! . . . But the man I speak of is no coward. . . ."

He paused.

"This has never happened before . . . not this kind of business,". . . he began again, slightly shaking his head. . . . "I wonder how Kostiúshka got hold of him. . . . He is gathering the cormorants together against me, the cursed rascal! . . ."

"And why are they afraid of you?"

The driver smiled.

"Yes, there is no doubt they are afraid of me. I gave one of them his quietus, not far from here. . . ."

He reined in the horses, and, turning towards me, he said: "Look back; do you see the hollow yonder! . . . I killed a man there, on that very spot!"

It seemed to me that his voice trembled as he uttered these words, and, by the light of the dawn, that was beginning to brighten the eastern sky, I fancied I could detect an expression of deep sadness in his eyes.

We had reached the top of the hill, where we paused. The road ran towards the west. Behind us, outlined against the brightening sky, stood the bold wooded hill whose rocky summit looked like a giant finger uplifted to the clouds.

The morning breeze blew fresh on the hill-top, and the chilled horses, snorting impatiently, pawed the ground. The middle horse was about to start when the driver, checking him, bent over on his box and peered in the direction of the hollow.

Then, suddenly turning, he gathered up the reins, rose on the box, and shouted aloud.

Starting on a gallop, we fairly flew from the top of the hill to the bottom. It was a wild ride. With flattened ears, the horses dashed onward, as if beside themselves with fear, while the driver continued to rise from his seat and to wave his right arm. The tróïka seemed to feel, although it could not see, his motions. . . . The ground vanished beneath the wheels; the trees and shrubs ran to meet us, and seemed to fall as we passed, as though beaten down by a furious gale. . . .

When we were again on level ground, the horses were steaming. The middle horse panted heavily, and the side horses trembled, snorted, and moved their ears restlessly to and fro. Little by little, however, their terror left them. The driver slackened the reins, and spoke in soothing tones: "Gently, dearies, gently! . . . Don't be frightened! . . . Isn't it wonderful that a horse, a dumb beast," he said to me, "should understand so well . . . for, every time we reach the top of this hill, it is impossible to hold them. . . . They scent a crime. . . ."

"That may be so," I said, "but you urged them yourself just now."

"Did I, really? Well, maybe I did! Ah, sir, if you knew what a weight there is on my mind! . . ."

"Well, if you tell me, I shall know! . . ."

The "Slayer" looked down.

"Very well," he replied, after a pause, "I will tell you. . . . Go on, my darlings, don't be frightened! . . ." And the horses started at an easy trot along the soft road.

"It all took place long ago, . . . and yet not so long ago, either; but much has happened since, and the great change in my life makes the past seem far away! I have been deeply wronged by those who were my superiors. And God, also, sent me sorrow; I lost my young wife and my child at one stroke, and, having no parents, I was left quite alone in the world, with neither relatives nor friends; and the priest himself took what little remained to me, to pay for the funeral. Living quite alone, I had more chance for meditation; and the more I pondered, the less I believed, until my former

faith was shaken, if not lost, and I found no new one to take its place. It is true I am an ignorant man, — I hardly know how to read, — and I dared not trust too much to my own reason, . . . and I felt so heart-sick, so sad, I would gladly have gone out of this world. . . . I gave up my hut and what little land was left me, all that I possessed, took an extra sheepskin coat, a pair of trousers, and a pair of boots, broke off a branch in the forest for a staff, and started. . . ."

"Where were you going?"

"Nowhere in particular. Sometimes I stayed in one place, and worked regularly day after day; then, again, I would wander from place to place, ploughing a field here and there, or lending a hand at harvest-time. In some places I stayed but for a day, or perhaps for a week, in others, for a month; and all this time I was watching to see how people lived, how they prayed and what they believed. . . . In a word, I was looking for upright people."

"And did you find them?"

"How can I tell? . . . There are all kinds of people; and each one has his own troubles,

of course. Still, it must be admitted that people in our neighborhood devote but little thought to God. . . . Each one thinks only about himself, how to satisfy his own desires; and can that be called living according to God's laws! And who can say that the robber who wears the chains is the actual robber, after all! . . . Do you not agree with me?"

"What you say has some truth, no doubt. . . . Well, and what next?"

"And so I grew more and more gloomy, for I saw there was no chance of improvement. Of course, I know a little better now; but even now. . . . But at that time I was beside myself, and it suddenly occurred to me that I might become a convict."

"How could you do that?"

"Very simply. I called myself a vagrant, and was shut up in consequence. It was a sort of penance that I had imposed upon myself. . . ."

"And did you feel better after that?"

"Not a bit of it! It was simple folly. Perhaps you never were in prison, and, if so, you cannot know. But I have found out all I care

to know about that kind of cloister. People who live an idle life, perfectly useless to the world, are pretty sure to fall into wicked ways, and seldom, if ever, do they think of God or of their own salvation; for, if they do, they are treated to the gibes and mockery of their companions. I soon found that my stupidity had brought me into the wrong place; so I told them who I was, and begged to be set free. But this was not a simple matter. Information had to be obtained, one thing and another investigated. . . . And, moreover, they said to me, 'How did you dare to call yourself what you were not?' I don't know how the business would have ended had it not been for something that came to pass just then, . . . which, although it was not a good thing for me, perhaps saved me from something worse. . . .

"One day the report spread throughout the prison that the penitent Bezrúky was to be brought in. I heard the rumor much discussed, some believing it to be true, while others distrusted it. But for me it was a matter of indifference just then. What did I care whether they brought him or not!—it was

all one to me! — Prisoners were arriving every day. But the convicts who had just come from town confirmed the story that they were bringing Bezrúky under a strong escort, and that he would be there at night. Prompted by curiosity, our gray population had gathered in the yard. I went with them, not from curiosity, however. . . . When I was uneasy, I often walked up and down in the yard. I was pacing to and fro, and had almost forgotten about Bezrúky, when suddenly the gates were opened, and an old man was led in. He was short and thin, and he wore a long white beard; one arm hung powerless by his side, and he tottered as he walked, like one whose feet refuse to support him. And yet, at this one man, five bayonets were levelled by the guards who escorted him. The sight overcame me. 'Heavens!' I thought, 'what does it mean? Can a man be treated like a wild beast! And no stalwart, brawny fellow, but a feeble, insignificant old man, who looks as if he might not live the week out! . . .'

"And I pitied him from the bottom of my heart; and the more I looked, the more I pitied

him. He was led into the office, and a smith was called to shackle his hands and feet. The old man took the fetters, made the sign of the cross over them (after the manner of the Old Faith), and put them on his feet. 'Fasten it,' he said to the smith. Then he made a second sign of the cross over the handcuffs, and, passing his hands through them, said: 'Suffer me to wear them, O Lord, as a penance!'"

The driver bent his head and relapsed into silence, as though re-living, in his memory, the scene he had been describing. Then, suddenly lifting his head, he resumed: —

"From that moment he took possession of my heart! I must confess that he bewitched me, and, even though I afterwards discovered him to be a tempter and a fiend, an incarnate devil, — may the Lord forgive me for saying so! when I recall that prayer of his, I can hardly believe it, — so well could he play the saint that he seemed altogether different from the man he really was.

"And I was not the only one who felt his influence. Even our gray convicts became subdued; they gazed at him in silence. The

scoffers grew quiet, and many crossed themselves. That was the way he affected them, sir!

"As for me, I yielded myself completely to his influence. For at that time my faith was unsettled, and this man seemed to me like the righteous men of old. I had made no friends in the prison; indeed, I had hardly spoken to any one, and of the conversation around me I took no more heed than of the buzzing of flies. . . . Whatever my thoughts were, whether good or bad, I kept them to myself, and shared them with no one. I made up my mind that I would, if possible, make my way into the cell where the old man was kept in solitary confinement, and, watching my chance, I gave five kopeks to the guards, who allowed me to pass; and afterwards they used to let me in without any bribe. I looked in at his window, and saw an old man walking to and fro, muttering to himself, his shackles dragging behind him as he went. When he saw me, he turned, and came up to the door. 'What do you want?' he asked.—'Nothing in particular,' I said; 'I have come to make you a call. I thought you

might be lonely.'—'I am not alone here,' he said; 'I am with God, and one is never lonely who dwells with God. Still, I am glad to see a good man.'—And thus I stood facing him, looking so like a fool that he could not help noticing my expression; but he said nothing, only gazed at me and shook his head. One day he said to me, 'Draw back a little from the window, my lad; I want to get a better look at you.' I stepped back, and he put his eye to the opening, and, after gazing long at me, he said: 'Tell me something about yourself!'

"'What is there to tell!' I said; 'I am a ruined man!'—'Can I trust you?' he asked. 'You will not deceive me?'—'I have never deceived any one, and surely I would not deceive you. I will do anything for you.' He thought awhile, and then he said: 'I want to send some one outside to-night. Will you go?'—'How can I get out?' I asked.—'I will teach you,' he said. And his instructions were so successful that I left the prison that night, as easily as if it had been my own hut. I found the man to whom I was sent, and gave him the message, but, when on my way back

the next morning, I must admit that, as I was approaching the prison, just before daybreak, a sense of excitement came over me. Why should I remain a prisoner of my own accord? Since I was free, the best thing I could do would be to leave those parts. The prison was in the country, and a broad highway lay before me. The dew glistened on the grass; it was close upon harvest-time. Beyond the river, I could hear the gentle soughing of the forest. . . . A lovely picture! And behind me stood the prison, frowning and blinking like an owl. . . . At night, when all is still, one does not care; but by daylight! . . . When I thought of the busy day spinning like a wheel, it seemed as though I could not bear it. My heart leaped within me, and the temptation to follow the road, to regain my lost liberty, and to roam hither and yonder at my own will, was almost too strong for me. . . . But when I remembered the old man, I felt that I could not deceive him. Stretching myself out on the grass, with my face downward, I rested awhile; then rose, and, without once looking back, took the direction of the

prison. Looking up as I approached, I saw my old man in the tower, where our secret cells were, sitting by the window, watching me from behind the bars.

"During the day, I found a chance to glide into his cell and tell him how I had carried out his orders. He looked more cheerful, as he said to me: 'Thank you, my child! You have done me a great favor; I shall never forget it.' And after a pause he added, smiling, 'I suppose you are anxious to be free?'—'Yes, I am anxious, more than words can say.'—'I thought so. And what brought you here!'—'My own folly; I have committed no crime.' He shook his head and said: 'It makes me sad to see you. God has given you so much strength; you are no longer a boy, and yet you know very little about life. Here you are locked up. . . . And what is the good of it? The world, it is true, is full of sin, and yet it is in the world that you work out your salvation. . . .'—'Yes, I know there is sin in the world,' I replied, 'but there is just as much of it here, where there is nothing to be gained by sinning.'—'Have you repented of your own sins?' he inquired.

"'I am disgusted with myself!'

"'Disgusted, and yet you know not why. This is not true repentance. True repentance is sweet. Listen, and remember what I tell you: God alone is without sin; man is a sinner by his very nature, and is saved by repentance alone. He must repent of his sins. How is he to repent who has committed no sin? And yet unless he does repent, we are told, he cannot be saved. Do you understand?'

"At the time, I must admit, I understood his words imperfectly; yet they sounded like good words. I had thought much about my own life: other people seemed to live their lives for some purpose, but not I; I was like the field-grass or a fox in the woods, — no good to myself or to others. To be sure, if I were living in the world, I should probably be sinning, and here I was only restless. It is true, I did not know how to live; but why talk of living, when I was still shut up in prison! 'I can manage that affair,' said the old man. 'I have prayed about you: it has been given to me to lead your soul out of prison. . . . If you will promise to obey me,

I will show you the road to repentance.' — 'I will promise,' I replied. — 'And will you take your oath?' — 'I will,' I said. And so I pledged myself, for at that time he had so won my confidence that I was utterly in his power. I would have gone through fire and water for him. . . . I trusted that man. One of the convicts tried to warn me: 'Why are you so intimate with Bezrúky? Don't be taken in by his piety! You know about his hand: a traveller on the highway, whom he was planning to rob, sent a bullet through it.' But I paid no heed to what he said, since he was tipsy at the time, and I cannot abide a drunken man. When I turned away from him he took offence. 'Go to the deuce, fool that you are!' I must allow that he was correct, although he was a drunkard.

"About this time, Bezrúky was less strictly guarded. He was brought from his cell into the general prison, but, like myself, he remained almost as solitary as before. Whenever the convicts teased him, or attempted to joke with him, he made no reply in words; but his glance was enough to make the boldest of them quail.

He had an evil eye. . . . After a while came the time for his release. One summer day, as I was walking in the yard, I saw the superintendent go into the office, immediately followed by Bezrúky, under escort, and in less than an hour they both came out on the porch, Bezrúky dressed in his own suit of clothes, ready to leave, and looking quite happy, and the superintendent also smiling. I could not help thinking how strictly he was guarded when they brought him in — an innocent man, as he called himself. I felt sad and lonely at the thought of being left behind. Bezrúky glanced around, and, seeing me, made a sign, and I went up to him, pulling off my cap and saluting the chief, while Bezrúky said: —

"'I say, Your Excellency, could you look out for this lad? He has not done anything.'

"'What is your name?' asked the superintendent.

"'Feódor Seelin,' I replied.

"'Ah, I remember! We will see about you. No man is to be condemned for his own stupidity. This fellow ought to be kicked out, to teach him better than to come where he does

not belong. That's all there is about it, for I believe the necessary information was received some time ago. He will certainly be released in the course of a week.'

"'That's good,' said Bezrúky, 'and you, my lad,' he continued, calling me aside, 'when you are released, go to Kildéyef's and ask for the master, Iván Zakhárof. I have spoken to him about you, my boy — and remember your oath.'

"And then they went away. In a week I too was released, and went at once, according to Bezrúky's directions, to the appointed place, where I found Iván Zakhárof, and when I explained to him that Bezrúky had sent me, 'I know!' he said; 'the old man has spoken to me about you. Well, you may work for me for a while, and we will see later what is to be done.'

"'And where is Bezrúky now?' I inquired.

"'He is away on business,' he answered; 'but we expect him shortly.'

"And so I remained there; but not really as a workman, for no duties were assigned to me. The family was a small one — the master, a

grown-up son, who was a workman . . . and myself, beside the women-folks, and Bezrúky, who was there from time to time. They were *Staroviéry*,* and very pious people, strict followers of the law; they never used tobacco or liquor. And as to their workman, Kuzmá, he was a ragged, half-witted fellow, as black as an Ethiopian; as soon as he heard the tinkle of a bell, he used to rush out and hide in the bushes, and, above all, he stood in mortal terror of Bezrúky. If he caught sight of him in the distance, he would run for the woods, to hide himself, and always in the very same place. The family might call him again and again—he never would answer a syllable. But let Bezrúky go after him and speak one word, he would follow like a lamb, and do everything he bade him.

"Bezrúky did not come often, and, when he did come, he hardly ever talked with me. I used to notice that, when talking with the master, he would, at the same time, often look at me, to see how I worked; but if I approached him, he always told me that he was

* Believers of the Old Faith.

busy. 'Have patience, my lad! I am coming to live here before long; then we shall have more time to talk.' I had fallen into a restless state of mind, though I had nothing to complain of — I was not overworked, and never had a cross word spoken to me; the food was good, and, though I was a driver, I was but seldom sent out with any traveller. It was generally the master himself who went, or the son with the workman, particularly if it happened to be in the night-time. Yet, when I was idle, I felt more dejected than ever, as might naturally be expected. My thoughts kept my mind uneasy and restless. . . .

"Returning home from the mill, one evening, some weeks after I was released, I found our hut full of men. I unharnessed the horse, and was just on the point of entering the porch when the master came out and said: 'Don't go in yet; wait till I call you! Mind what I say; don't go in yet!' — 'What's all this about!' I thought to myself; but I turned and went up to the hay-loft, where I stretched myself out on the hay. Finding it impossible to sleep, and remembering that I had left my axe by

the brook, I decided to go after it, for I thought to myself that those men might discover it on their way home, and carry it off with them. As I passed by the windows, I looked in and saw that the room was full of men; the inspector himself was seated at a table, on which were spread food and brandy, together with paper and pens . . . in short, it was plainly to be seen that an investigation was going on; and seated on a bench near the wall I beheld Bezrúky himself. Good heavens! I was completely paralyzed! His hair was disarranged, his hands bound behind him, his eyes shining like two fiery coals. . . . I can hardly tell you how dreadful he seemed to me. . . .

"I drew back, and stood at a short distance from the window. . . . It was autumn; the night was dark and starry; I shall never forget it. I heard the splash of the river and the murmur of the forests as if in a dream. Trembling, I dropped on the grass by the river-bank. How long I had stayed there I cannot say when I heard some one coming along the forest-path, swinging a cane. He wore a white coat

and hat, and I recognized the clerk, who lived four versts from there. He crossed the bridge and went straight to the hut, and I could not resist going up to the window to see what would happen next. . . . He entered, took off his cap, and looked around. Evidently, he did not know why he had been summoned. As he went up to the table, he said, in passing Bezrúky, 'How do you do, Iván Alekséyitch!' Such a glance as Bezrúky gave him! The proprietor pulled him by the sleeve and whispered something in his ear that seemed to surprise him. He went up to the inspector, who had already been imbibing rather freely, and who, rousing himself, looked up at him with his blurred eyes, and, after exchanging the usual greeting, asked, pointing at Bezrúky, 'Do you know this man?'—'No,' he replied, 'I don't remember ever seeing him before.'

"What could it all mean? The inspector certainly knew him well. He went on with his examination.

"'Is this Iván Alekséyef, who belongs in this neighborhood, and is known under the name of Bezrúky?'

"'No,' replied the clerk; 'that is not he.'

"The inspector picked up his pen, and, after writing something down, he proceeded to read it aloud. And I stood outside, by the window, wondering what it all meant; for he read from the paper that this old man, Iván Alekséyef, was not Iván Alekséyef; that neither the clerk nor the neighbors recognized him as such; and that he called himself Iván Ivánof, and showed his passport in proof of it. Wonderful thing! Of all these people who set their hands to the document, not one of them seemed to know him. It was certain that the witnesses had been carefully chosen for the occasion, for they were all debtors of Iván Zakhárof — his slaves, in fact.

"After this business was transacted, the witnesses were allowed to depart. . . . The inspector had previously ordered that Bezrúky should be set at liberty, and Iván Zakhárof brought the money and handed it to the inspector, who, after counting it, put it in his pocket.

"'Now, old man, you will have to leave these parts for the next three months! But if

you choose to stay, remember that you are not to blame me. . . . Well, now get my horses ready.'

"I left the window and went up into the hay-loft, expecting that some one would presently come to fetch the horses, and I did not want to be found lurking under the windows. As I lay on the hay, unable to go to sleep, I felt as if I were in a dream. . . . Somehow, I could not collect my thoughts. I heard the tinkling of the bell as the inspector drove away, saw that the lights were put out, and all became still in the house. I was just falling asleep when again I heard a bell, for it was a very still night, and one could hear sounds a long way off . . . it drew nearer and nearer. . . . Some one was coming towards the hut from the direction of the river. By and by the folks in the hut heard it, and a fire had been kindled by the time the tróïka drove up into the yard. A driver whom we knew had brought the travellers here, as a friendly return for the customers we had brought him.

"I thought that they would very likely spend the night here, and, if not, I knew that they

seldom sent me out at night, for it was generally the master who drove — or maybe his son, with the workman; so I was just falling asleep again, when I was roused by the voices of the master and Bezrúky, who were conversing in an undertone under the roof of the hay-shed.

"'Well, what shall we do now?' said the old man; 'where is Kuzmá?'

"'That's the trouble; Iván has gone with the inspector, and as soon as Kuzmá saw the crowd he ran to the bushes, and he is not to be found.'

"'Such a fool! I believe he is half-witted! And how about Feódor?' the old man said — meaning me, you understand.

"'When Feódor came home from the mill to-night, he wanted to go into the hut, but I would not let him.'

"'That's well. He must have gone to sleep. You don't think that he saw anything?'

"'I suppose not, for he went directly to the hay-loft.'

"'That is good. We will try him to-night.'

"'You had better look out! Do you dare to trust him?' said Zakhárof.

"'Yes; although he is a simple-minded lad, he has great strength, and, moreover, he obeys me; I can twist him round my little finger. Besides, you must remember that I am now about to go away for six months, and we must break him in before I go.'

"'Yes, but I cannot help distrusting him,' said Zakhárof; 'I have no faith in him whatever, although he looks so simple.'

"'Well, well, I know him; he is not a clever lad, to be sure, but that's the kind that best suits us. And we must certainly get rid of Kuzmá; I am afraid he will get us into some scrape.'

"Then I heard them call, 'Feódor!'—'Feódor!' and I really had not the courage to answer.

"'Get up, my good Feódor,' said the old man, in his sweetest tones. 'Were you asleep?' he asked.

"'Yes,' I replied. . . .

"'Get up, my boy, and harness the horses; you will have to drive the travellers. Do you remember your oath?'

"'I do'; and my teeth chattered as I spoke, and cold chills were running all over me.

"'I think the time for keeping your promise to obey all my commands is at hand. And, meanwhile, be lively about harnessing, for the travellers are in haste.'

"I pulled out the telyéga from the shed, put the collar on the middle horse, and began to harness. Meanwhile, my heart was throbbing violently, and I felt all the time as if this must be a dream.

"Bezrúky also saddled his own horse, which was docile as a dog; he could saddle him with one hand. Then he mounted, and, having whispered something into the horse's ear, he rode off. After harnessing the middle horse, I looked out of the gate, and watched him as he started on a trot towards the woods. Although the moon had not yet risen, it was tolerably light; and after I saw him disappear in the woods, I felt easier. I drove up to the door, and was asked to come in. The traveller was a young woman with three small children, the oldest of whom looked about four, and the youngest girl might have been two years old. 'I wonder where you are going, you poor creature!' I thought to myself; 'and without a husband,

too! Such a kind and friendly lady!' She made me sit down, and gave me some tea, and asked me what sort of a neighborhood it was, and whether there had been any reports of robberies. 'I have not heard of any,' I replied; and couldn't help thinking: 'Ah, my blessed heart, you are afraid!' and how could she help it, to be sure! She had a good deal of luggage, and all the signs of wealth, and, above all, there were her children. A mother's heart is an anxious one, and I don't suppose she was travelling for pleasure.

"Well, we started. It was about two hours before daylight. We had reached the highway, and driven on for a verst or so, when suddenly one of the side horses shied. 'What now!' I thought. I stopped the team, and saw Kuzmá creeping out of the bushes. There he stood, by the roadside, shaking his locks and grinning at me. 'Deuce take you!' said I to myself. I was somewhat startled, and the lady sat there more dead than alive. . . . The children were asleep, but she was wide-awake, watching. I knew that she was crying. . . . 'I am afraid,' she said. 'I am afraid of you

all. . . .'—'God bless you, my dear lady,' I cried, 'I am not a villain. Why didn't you stay at the hut, where you were? . . .'—'I was more frightened there than I am here. My last driver told me that we should come to a village at night; and, instead of that, he brought me to this place in the woods. And the old man had such a wicked look! . . .' she continued. . . . What was I to do with her! I could see that she felt very wretched. 'What had we better do now?' I asked. 'Will you turn back, or shall we go on?' And I walked round the carriage, trying to think of some way to comfort her, for I felt very sorry for her. We were not far from the Hollow, which could only be reached from the by-road; and we had to pass the 'Stone.' Seeing the quandary I was in, she cheered up, and said: 'Well, get up on the box, and let us go on. I am not going back, for I am afraid of those men. . . . I would rather go on with you; you look like a kind man.' At that time, sir, I was like a child; I had not the stamp of Cain on my face. Now men are afraid of me; they call me 'Slayer.' Then I too cheered up,

and mounted the box. 'Let us talk,' said the lady. And she began first to ask questions about me, and then she told me about herself: that she was going to join her husband, who was an exile belonging to the wealthy class. 'How long have you been with these people?' she asked, 'and are you living with them as a workman, or in what capacity?' — 'I came to them very recently, as a workman,' I replied. — 'What kind of folk are they?' — 'They seem to be fair sort of men; but who can tell?' I said; 'they are strict in their mode of life; they never use either wine or tobacco.' — 'That is not an essential,' she said. — 'And how ought one to live?' I asked; for I saw that she was a sensible woman, and thought that she might tell me something worth knowing. — 'Can you read?' she asked. — 'Yes,' I answered, 'a little.' — 'What is the chief commandment in the Bible?' — 'Love,' I replied. — 'You are right. And it says, moreover, there can be no greater love than when a man lays down his life for his brother. That is the substance of the law. Of course, one must use one's reason, too,' she added, 'and discriminate. But such forms as

moving the fingers in a certain manner, in order to make the sign of the cross, and abstaining from the use of tobacco, are not essential. . . .' —'You are right,' I replied; 'still, some forms are needed, to remind a man of his duties.'

"Thus we talked as we drove leisurely along. We came to a small stream in the woods, which we had to cross. It was a shallow stream, and, during the dry season, all one had to do was to give the ferry-boat a push and it would touch the opposite shore; there was no need of a ferry-man. The children, waking, opened their eyes, and saw that it was night-time. The soughing of the forest, the starlit sky overhead, the moon rising before daybreak, . . . all this was a novel sight for them, . . . of course, they didn't know much about such things!

"When we drove into the woods, I was fairly startled, and my heart almost stopped beating, for what did I see but a figure on horseback ahead of us! I could not see distinctly, but I thought I recognized Bezrúky's gray horse, and I could hear the clatter of his hoofs. My heart sank within me. 'What is going to happen now?' I thought. 'Why did the old

man come out here?' Now, it had seemed to me like a foreboding of evil when he reminded me of my oath, just before we started. . . . Until that evening I had thought a good deal of the old man, although I must confess I always stood in awe of him; but now I began to be really afraid of him — the very thought of his face made me shiver.

"As I sat there, without moving, my mind seemed paralyzed and I could scarcely hear a sound. The lady spoke now and then, but I was unable to answer her; at last she gave up trying to talk, and there she sat, the poor creature! . . .

"We had now entered an impenetrable forest. My spirits were gloomier than the night itself. I was half-unconscious, but the horses, familiar with the road, carried us along without my guidance, toward that self-same stone. We reached it, . . . and there, just as I anticipated, stood the gray horse across the road, and the eyes of the old man bestriding him gleamed like two coals of fire, so help me God! . . . The reins fell from my hands, and my horses, coming up to the gray horse, stopped of their own accord.

"'Feódor!' said the old man, 'get down!' I jumped down from the box, and he himself dismounted, having placed his horse directly in front of the tróïka, which stood perfectly still, as if bewitched; I too seemed to be under a spell. He came up to me, and said something; then, taking me by the hand, he led me to the carriage, and I discovered that I was holding an axe! . . . I yielded to him, . . . for I had not the courage to resist, villain that he was. 'Sin, and you will repent afterwards. . . .' What else he said I know not. We went up to the carriage. He stood beside me. 'First strike the woman on the head!' I looked into the carriage. There sat the lady, like a wounded dove, shielding her children, and gazing at me with all her eyes. My heart quivered. . . . The children were awake; they looked like birdlings. I cannot tell whether they understood what was going on, or not. . . .

"Her gaze seemed to rouse me as from a dream. Lifting the axe, I turned my eyes away. . . . But my heart was swelling with rage. . . . I looked at Bezrúky, who quailed

beneath my glance. . . . Then my wrath grew more furious. I knew that I was about to do a horrible deed; but I had no pity. Once more I looked at the old man, whose green eyes flashed restlessly. . . . He was frightened, and that made him wriggle like a snake. I raised my arm and struck out, . . . and, before he could groan, I stretched him prostrate at my feet, and then I stamped upon him as he lay there dead, . . . for I was like nothing but an infuriated beast, the Lord have mercy on me!"

The driver breathed heavily.

"And what happened then?" I inquired, seeing him thoughtful and silent.

"What did you say?" he replied; "you want to know what happened next? Well, as I said, I was stamping on him as he lay there dead, when, behold! I saw Iván Zakhárof galloping towards us, with a rifle in his hand. I turned just as he reached us, . . . and I should have certainly finished him, as I did Bezrúky, only, I am thankful to say, he had the sense to turn back. Just as soon as his eye lighted on me, he turned his horse, dealing him heavy blows with the rifle. The horse actually

howled like a human being, and flew like a bird.

"When, at last, I came to my senses, it seemed to me that I could not look any one in the eye. . . . I mounted the box and gave the horses the lash, . . . but they refused to start, . . . and then I saw that the gray horse was still barring the way. I had forgotten that he had been trained to do that. I made the sign of the cross, as it came to my mind that I might have to kill that cursed horse also. I went up to him, but he remained motionless except for the movement of his ears. I pulled him by the rein, but he would not stir. 'You had better get out of the carriage, madam,' I said, 'for the horses might become frightened and run, because of this horse, which persists in standing right in front of them.' Obedient as a child, the lady got out, and the children followed, clinging to their mother. The place itself was dark and gloomy; that alone frightened them, and then to see me in trouble with these devils.

"I backed my tróïka, took up the axe once more, and went close to the gray horse. 'Get

out of the way,' I cried, 'else I will kill you!' He pricked up his ears, as much as to say, 'I will not budge. . . . The deuce take you!' . . . Everything grew blurred before my eyes. My hair seemed to stand on end. . . . Swinging the axe, I struck him on the head with all my might. . . . He uttered a scream, and fell down dead. . . . I took him by the legs, dragged him towards his master, and then I put them side by side, near the edge of the road. 'Stay there, will you!'

"'Get in,' I said to the lady. She helped the younger children first, but had not strength enough left to get the oldest one in. . . . 'Will you help me?' she said. As I went up to them, the boy put out his arms to me, and I was about to lift him up, when I remembered. . . . 'Take the child away,' I cried; 'I am stained with blood, and am not fit to touch him! . . .'

"Finally they managed in some way to get into the telyéga, and I took the reins; but the horses snorted, and refused to stir. What was I to do? 'Put the baby on the box, . . .' I said. She placed the child beside me, holding him from behind. I gave the horses a blow

with the reins, and they started on the run. . . . just as you saw them a short time ago. They ran to escape the scent of blood.

"In the morning I brought the lady to the local police-quarters in the village, and there I told my story. 'Arrest me, for I have killed a man.' The lady told them just how it all hap pened. 'This man saved my life,' she said. They bound me with ropes, and she cried at the sight, poor dear! 'Why do you bind him? He did a good deed; he saved my children from murderers! . . .' She was a determined one! Seeing that no one heeded her words, she tried to untie the ropes with her own hands, but I stopped her. 'Don't do that,' I said. 'Don't be anxious about this matter; it is no longer in the hands of man, but in the care of the Lord. Whether I am guilty or innocent, God and the world will judge. . . .'—'How can you be guilty?' she said.—'It was my pride,' I replied; 'my guilt sprang from my pride. I thought I was better and wiser than most men, and I be-came intimate with those wretches because I was too proud to take advice, and through my own self-conceit I have become a murderer. . . .'

She yielded at last to my remonstrances, and desisted. When she came to bid me good-by, in her compassion, she embraced me. . . . 'My poor fellow!' she said, and bade the children kiss me. 'No, no!' I exclaimed; 'don't stain the children; I am a murderer! . . .' I feared lest the children might shrink from me. But she lifted the two younger ones in her arms, and the oldest one came of his own accord, and when he put his arms around my neck I broke down, and burst out sobbing. I could not control myself. Oh, what a kind-hearted lady she was! . . . Maybe the Lord will forgive me, for her sake. . . .

"'If there be any justice in this world,' she said to me, 'we will obtain it for you. I shall not forget you as long as I live!' And she was as good as her word. You know what our courts are, . . . continual delays. I should have been in prison up to this day, had it not been for the efforts that she and her husband made to gain my release."

"Then, you were imprisoned for some time?"

"Yes, for quite a while. And the want of

money was the cause of it. After a time she sent me half a thousand rubles, and she and her husband wrote me a letter. As soon as it was known that money had come, my case began to move at once. The inspector appeared, and I was called to the office. 'Your case is before me,' he said; 'now, how much will you give me if I make it all right?'

"'A fine official you are!' I thought to myself; 'and what is it that he wants to be paid for? Instead of judging me fairly, according to the law, for which I should be truly thankful, he asks for a bribe. . . .'

"'I will give you nothing,' I said; 'judge me according to the law. . . .'

"He laughed. 'I see that you are a fool! The law admits of two interpretations; but that has been shelved, and, meanwhile, I have the authority in my hands. It is in my power to put you wherever I please.'

"'How so?'

"'It is a simple matter. You appear to be a stupid fellow. Listen! You will say, in your defence, that you saved the lives of this lady and her children.'

"'Yes,' I said. 'What then?'

"'Very well; and this might be attributed to you as an act of virtue, for it is a good deed. That is one view of the case.'

"'And what is the other one?' I asked.

"'The other one? Simply this. Consider your strength, see what a giant you are! The old man was like a child in your hands. When he suggested what you say, you should have politely tied his hands and brought him before the authorities; but, instead of doing this, you dealt him a blow which felled him to the ground. That was a lawless act, and one that you had no right to commit. You understand?'

"'I do,' I said. 'I see that I can find no justice! But I will give you nothing! You are not the judge, and this is not impartial judgment!'

He was angry.

"'Very well, then!' said he. 'You may rot in jail while your suit is going on!'

"'All right,' I said; 'but you need not threaten.'

"And so he had me locked up in jail. But the

lady persisted; she went so far as to intercede for me with the higher authorities, and it was not long before a document was received that made it hot for the inspector. One day I was summoned to the office, and, after a great deal of loud talking, was at last released. So, after all, I had no trial . . . and I hardly know . . . I have been told that, nowadays, justice is to be found in our courts, and I sometimes wish I could be tried by a jury and abide by their verdict."

"And what became of Iván Zakhárof?"

"Iván Zakhárof has never been heard from since. It was said that he and Bezrúky planned that the former was to follow me at a short distance, and, if I should refuse to commit the murder, Zakhárof was to shoot me. But you see it was not the will of the Lord, . . . for, when Zakhárof arrived upon the scene, everything was all over, and he took fright. I heard that, when he returned, he went directly to work to dig up his money; and, having done this, he made for the woods, without saying a word to any one. . . . Towards morning the house caught fire.

Whether he set it on fire accidentally, or whether it was done by Kuzmá, was never known; but one thing is certain — that, by night-fall, nothing was left of it but a bed of coals, and thus the rogues' nest was destroyed. The women are beggars to this day, and the son is a convict, for he had no money to buy himself off.

"Ho! . . . my dearies, we have arrived, thanks be to God! See, the sun is just rising! . . ."

IV.

A VOLTAIRIAN OF SIBERIA.

A MONTH passed. I had transacted my business, and was returning to the city of N. by post relays.

About noon we reached the station, where the stout postmaster stood on the porch, smoking a cigar.

"I suppose you want fresh horses?" he asked, before I had time to utter a greeting.

"Yes," I replied.

"All gone!"

"Please, don't say that, Vasíli Ivánovitch! Cannot I see that . . ."

For I distinctly saw a partly harnessed tróïka standing under the shed.

He laughed.

"Truly, I know you are not in haste just now, and I will ask you to wait awhile."

"For what reason? Are you expecting the governor?"

"Not quite so high a personage as the governor, I should hope; no, only a privy councillor, but I should like to accommodate this fellow. . . . Don't get vexed, for I am quite as anxious to accommodate you; but your need is not urgent, and this is in the interests of justice and humanity in general, so to speak."

"What have you to do with justice? What business is it?"

"If you will wait I will tell you all about it. But why stand here? Come into my 'cabin,' will you?"

I agreed, and followed Vasíli Ivánovitch into his "cabin," where his wife, a stout, good-

natured person, was waiting for us at the tea-table.

"You were speaking about justice," began Vasíli Ivánovitch; "have you heard the name of Proskuróf?"

"No, I have not."

"How should he?" interposed Matróna Ivánovna. "He is just such another lawless fellow as my husband; he even writes for the papers."

"You are very much mistaken, Matróna Ivánovna," said Vasíli Ivánovitch, warmly; "Proskuróf is a highly respectable man, and in favor with his superiors. You ought to burn a wax taper to my patron saint as a thanks-offering for your husband's respectable acquaintances. If that's your opinion in regard to Proskuróf, I should like to ask if you suppose that they would send a good-for-nothing man as examining magistrate on such important business as this?"

"What are you talking about?" I inquired. "What about an examining magistrate on important business?"

"That's what I say!" said Matróna Ivánovna,

encouraged. "I think you are talking nonsense. Do you take me for a fool, pray? Do important magistrates look like that?"

"You have made Matróna Ivánovna doubt me," said the station-master, shaking his head reproachfully, "and without any sufficient knowledge on your part. True, no office like that exists; but if a man is appointed owing to the special confidence that is reposed in him, it is still better. . . ."

"I am at a loss to understand you," I remarked.

"That is just what I complain of; you admit that you don't understand, and yet you don't hesitate to excite doubts in the mind of an inexperienced woman! Yes, and are you not aware that a stock-company, so to speak, has been organized, that manages all this highway and dark night business? Is it possible that you know nothing about it!"

"I have heard such rumors, of course."

"I thought you must have heard of it. It is a company that embraces every class of society. The business is conducted on a large scale, having for its motto: 'One hand washes the other.'

They have no objection to a certain notoriety; and it is a fact that every one knows of the existence of such a company, and even the names of the individuals who are interested in it. I say every one — His Excellency, of course, excepted. Not very long ago, a notorious affair occurred, after which His Excellency conceived a brilliant idea. He had come to the determination that, if it was possible, this evil should be suppressed. Of course, such attempts have been made before. The members of the company, for instance, have suppressed themselves, and all ended well. But this time the idea was particularly brilliant. His Excellency was very much enraged, and empowered his private clerk, Proskuróf, with ample authority to act on every occasion — not only in regard to affairs that have already taken place, but also in all future ones or in such as might have any connection with those that had previously occurred."

"What is there so remarkable in that?"

"Well, sometimes the Lord sees fit to enlighten even babes. But the wonder is that an honest and energetic man has been found: he

has been engaged in this business of suppression for the past three months, and such a commotion as he has raised, the Lord help us! About a dozen horses have been ruined."

"Well, what good does that do you?"

"It was not Proskuróf who ruined the horses. . . . He would not do such a thing. It is the rural police, the men who follow him about on private horses — competition, you know — trying to get ahead of him and to be the first on the spot where a crime has been committed, for the sake of duty, of course. However, they seldom succeed. Proskuróf is our Lecocq. Once, to be sure, they succeeded in stealing some evidence from under his very nose. . . . He felt much aggrieved at it, poor fellow, so much so that he actually forgot himself in the official report, and stated 'that, owing to the endeavor of the rural police, all measures had been taken to conceal the evidences of crime!' Ha-ha-ha!"

"Yes, that's the reason why I say that he is a case — like yourself!"

"No, he is all right," rejoined Vasíli Ivánovitch. "And, supposing he did make a blun-

der, that is what might happen to the most careful person. He acknowledged his own mistake, when they pressed him, and, to justify himself, he declared that it was a clerical error. 'Guard against such errors in the future,' was the reply, 'lest you be discharged on account of poor health.' He is a funny fellow, I must say! Ha-ha-ha!"

"And what have you to do with all this?" I asked.

"I lend my co-operation. Ask my wife; we have a regular compact — a secret treaty. He does the suppressing, and I always keep horses in readiness for him. For instance, to-day a murder was committed somewhere along the highway, and his man was despatched to inform him of it, which means that the 'Eradicator' himself will be here shortly; so my horses are partly ready, and, moreover, I have sent word to my colleagues to have others in readiness at their stations. So, you see, even though one occupies the humble post of station-master, one may do some good to humanity — yes, sir. . . ."

At the end of this tirade, the jolly station-

master dropped his serious tone and began to laugh.

"Stop laughing," I said to him, "and tell me seriously, do you believe in this policy of eradication yourself, or are you only an observer?"

Vasíli Ivánovitch took a long pull at his cigar, and remained silent for a time.

At last he replied, in an earnest tone, "Well, I don't know that I have asked myself this question. Let me consider. No, I cannot say that I do! All this mission is devilish nonsense! He will soon be discharged; there is no doubt about that! But he is a most interesting subject. It is true that, at the bottom of my heart, I have very little faith in his success. Sometimes he appears ridiculous to me; still, I go on helping him, and I dare say my wife is right — very likely I shall irritate my superiors against me. And that will do me small good. But am I the only one? There are many others who sympathize with him. That is what makes him strong, of course. But, strange to say, no one really believes in his success. You have just heard Matróna

Ivánovna say that genuine magistrates are not like him, and that is only the echo of public opinion. Meanwhile, however, while this infant pushes ahead, 'holding high his banner,' as the papers express it, every man with a particle of feeling, every disinterested man, takes the trouble to kick stones out of the said infant's path, lest he stumble and fall. Still, this is no remedy. . . ."

"Why not? With the sympathy of a population, naturally interested in all this?"

"Ah, but that is just the point! It is not pure sympathy! You will probably see for yourself what kind of an infant this is! He pushes ahead without discretion, with no definite plan, quite indifferent to the fact that he will probably be gobbled up in the end. Meanwhile, outsiders look on, and shake their heads, as much as to say, 'That infant will be eaten up sooner or later!' Of course, one feels sorry for him. One says, 'Your path shall be smoothed here for a space, but, after all is done, you will certainly be devoured further on.' But he recks nothing of danger. What does sympathy amount to, when faith in the

success of one's enterprise is lacking? A genuine magistrate is needed; a man with the wisdom of a serpent, one who knows the ins and outs, who could overawe men at times, and not disdain to receive a bribe occasionally — for, after all, who can be a true magistrate who refuses that! In such a man the community would have faith. He is the one to eradicate! But, then, the deuce take it! there would be no sympathy, and the matter would be attributed to the clashing of official interests. . . . So there you have it! . . . Such is our country! . . . We had better drink our tea!" Vasíli Ivánovitch finished abruptly, and shifted uneasily in his chair.

"Pour the tea, Matréyntchik," he said, in caressing tones, turning to his wife, who was listening with an air of profound interest to her husband's words. "And don't you think we had better take a glass of something before tea?"

Vasíli Ivánovitch himself was a very interesting character, such as is to be found only in Siberia, for in no other country is one likely to

encounter a philosopher occupying the position of station-master. Had Vasíli Ivánovitch been an exile, this would have been nothing unusual. Fortune's wheel, in its rotation, has hurled many a man from high position into some remote corner of the world, who, while seeking to rise again, introduces into these lower spheres new methods of education and culture. But with Vasíli Ivánovitch it was just the reverse; in his radicalism he was descending slowly but surely from the upper to the lower stages. He looked upon this state of things with the serenity of a true philosopher. Under some educational influence, not uncommon in this country of exiles, he had in his youth acquired the tastes and inclinations of an intelligent man, and had always prized them above all other advantages of life. Besides, he was something of an artist. When he was in a mood for talking, one could listen to him until one forgot all about one's own business. While he was relating anecdotes and stories, and giving descriptions, a panorama of the characteristic and local types of the times previous to the reform seemed to pass before the

eyes of the listener: all those rapacious and eager inspectors; and well fed bailiffs, who were beginning to realize the comforts of life; bailiffs at the top of the ladder, who had reached the height of felicity; counsellors, senior-counsellors, commission employés of all kinds . . . and enthroned above all this world, so familiar to Vasíli Ivánovitch in its minutest details, sat the local Jupiters in their good-nature and grandeur, with their demonstrative Pompadour storms, their childlike ignorance of the country, their horizon imported from the St. Petersburg departments, and the sense of power of the mighty satrap. All these elements in the stories of Vasíli Ivánovitch were vivified by the sympathetic touches of the true artist who loves his subject. And for Vasíli Ivánovitch, his country, although he often painted it in such unattractive colors, was a subject of deepest interest. As an intelligent man, he might truly apply to himself the poet's verse: —

"I love my country, but with a strange love!"

And his love was sincere, although it brought him to a gradual "degradation," as he expressed it. When, after one of those

reverses brought upon him by his insatiable craving for exposing the truth, he was offered a fair position in Russia, he, after some hesitation, replied, "No, sir; I am much obliged to you, but it goes against me. . . . I could not do it! What should I do there? Everything would be strange to me. Bless you! I should have no one to abuse!"

Whenever I read or hear a comparison between Siberia and Russia as it was before the reform, a subject very much in vogue at one time, it always brings to my mind one very decided difference, which was personified in the stout figure of my humorous friend. The fact is that Russia before the reform had not the advantage that Siberia possesses, of living in the neighborhood of a Russia reformed. For instance, one often meets in Siberia persons, not particularly intelligent either, who speak of their own country in terms of ironical criticism. Our Russian Skvozník-Dmukhanôvsky, in the simplicity of his intellectual directness, supposed that "God had thus ordained it, and the disciples of Voltaire vainly rebelled against it." The Siberian Skvozník witnessed the disap-

pearance of his Russian prototype, saw the triumph of the disciples of Voltaire, and his directness has long since vanished. He is always agitating, but has very little faith himself in his providential mission. When favorable influences prevail, he is cheerful; but let the wind blow from the wrong quarter, he gnashes his teeth and grows morbid. True, there is always a slender ray of hope shining through his despair — "Perhaps the next time it may succeed"; but, on the other hand, every hope is embittered by the poignant doubt, "Will it endure?" For, as the proverb says, "Chips fly in Siberia when trees are felled beyond the Ural." And beside him, smiling, stands the native "Voltairian," in his woollen coat, and by his smile he seems to say, "Still alive, my friend? Is it possible?" while he clandestinely scribbles his correspondence for unlicensed Russian papers.

"By the way," said Vasíli Ivánovitch, after tea, when, having lighted our cigars, we still continued our chat, "you have never told me what happened to you that time in the Hollow?"

And then I told him what the reader already knows.

Vasíli Ivánovitch remained pensive, scrutinizing the ashes on the end of his cigar.

"Yes, they are peculiar people, no doubt."

"Do you know them?"

"How shall I say? Yes; I have met and talked with them, and have taken tea with them, as I did with you just now. But, as to knowing them — no, I can't say I do. I can see through inspectors, or isprávniks,* probably because we are kindred spirits; but those people, I must confess, I do not understand. But of one thing I am confident, and that is that this Seelín will come to an unfortunate end. He will be made way with, sooner or later."

"Why do you think so?"

"How can it be otherwise! Your case was not the first. On all such dangerous expeditions, when almost every driver refuses, they have recourse to this fellow, and he is always ready. And you must remember that he never takes any weapons. It is true, he overawes them all. Since he killed Bezrúky, a wonder-

* Chief of police of a district.

ful prestige has attached itself to him, and he seems to believe in it himself. But this is only an illusion. Already they begin to say that a charmed bullet will kill the 'Slayer.' I suspect that the persistence with which this Constantine fires at him is explained by the fact that he has a supply of just such charmed bullets."

V.

THE EXTERMINATOR.

WHILE this conversation was going on, Vasíli Ivánovitch suddenly pricked up his ears.

"Wait a moment; I think I heard the bell. . . . It must be Proskuróf."

And the sound of the name seemed to restore Vasíli Ivánovitch to his habitual hilarity. He ran to the window. "Just as I expected! There comes our Exterminator! Look at him, will you! If that isn't a picture! Ha-ha-ha! That is the way he always drives. A truly conscientious man!" I went to the window. The bell sounded nearer and nearer. At first

I could see only a cloud of dust issuing from the forest and blowing in our direction. But the road that skirted the hill made here a sudden turn towards the station, and, in this place, we could see the team, directly below and very near us.

The post-horse tróïka, harnessed to a light taratáïka,* was making rapid progress. The fine dust and pebbles already flew from under the hoofs of the galloping horses; but the driver, leaning forward, urged them with an occasional shout to still greater speed. Behind him appeared a figure clad in a civilian's overcoat and a uniform cap. Although the uneven road pitched the taratáïka from side to side, and jolted the gentleman in the hat with the cockade, he did not seem to notice it in the least. He too was standing, bending forward over the box, and appeared to be superintending the horses, in order to make sure that each one was doing his share of the work. At times, he pointed out to the driver the one he thought ought to be urged, occasionally taking the whip from his hands, and using it himself,

* A two-wheeled vehicle.

in a conscientious but awkward way. From this occupation, which seemed to absorb his entire attention, he would now and then tear himself away, to look at his watch.

During all this time, while the tróïka was ascending the hill, Vasíli Ivánovitch laughed immoderately; but when, with one final jerk of the bell, it stopped in front of the porch, the station-master sat there on the lounge, smoking his cigar, in apparent oblivion of what was passing.

At first, we heard nothing but the heavy breathing of the tired horses; then suddenly the door was thrown open, and the new-comer burst into the room. He was a man possibly thirty-five years of age, rather small in stature, but with an uncommonly large head. His broad face, with its prominent cheek-bones, level brows, slightly turned-up nose, and thin lips, was almost square, and produced an effect of energy peculiar to itself. His large gray eyes looked straight ahead. In a general way, Proskuróf's face struck one at once by its seriousness — an impression that somehow vanished after a few seconds. The trim, official-

looking side-whiskers, which framed his smoothly shaven face, the parting on his chin, and certain abrupt motions peculiar to him, added at once a tinge of comicality to the first impression of this original person. Upon entering the room, Proskuróf paused and glanced about him, and as soon as he discovered Vasíli Ivánovitch he approached him. "Mr. Station-Master . . . Vasíli Ivánovitch, my dear fellow, let me have horses! For Heaven's sake, my dear sir, let me have horses, as quickly as possible!"

Vasíli Ivánovitch, who was stretched out on the lounge, assumed a cold, diplomatic expression of countenance.

"Impossible," said he; "besides, I believe you are not entitled to post-horses, and the horses belonging to the zémstvo* will presently be required for the inspector, who may arrive at any moment."

Too much surprised for utterance at the first moment, Proskuróf suddenly flared up.

"What do you mean? . . . Am I not here first? . . . A fine state of things! . . . In the

* The rural authorities. — Tr.

first place, you are mistaken as to my rights about the post-horses; I have my travelling documents with me, and I can produce them if it is necessary, . . . and, besides, on legal principles. . . ."

But Vasíli Ivánovitch had already begun to laugh.

"The deuce take you, you are eternally joking. You know I am in a hurry!" exclaimed Proskuróf, in a tone of vexation, for he had evidently been caught in the same trap more than once. "Hurry, for goodness sake! I have business on hand."

"I know it — a murder case."

"How do you know?" inquired the alarmed Proskuróf.

"How do you know?" repeated the postmaster, mimicking him. "The inspector knows it already. He told me."

"Stuff and nonsense!" replied the beaming Proskuróf. "They have not the least idea of it, — and my people have already arrested the criminal, . . . or I ought rather to say . . . the suspected party is in their hands. I tell you this promises to be a famous case! . . .

You just wait, and see me make them tumble!"

"Indeed! You had better take care lest you tumble yourself."

Just then the sound of a bell in the yard startled Proskuróf.

"Vasíli Ivánovitch," he said, in a coaxing tone, "I hear them harnessing! Is that for me?"

And, seizing the postmaster's hand, he threw an anxious glance in my direction.

"Yes, yes; it is for you! Be calm! But what business have you on hand, really?"

"A murder, my good fellow, another murder, . . . and such a murder!—with unmistakable evidence against the famous band! I hold all the threads. Unless I am on the wrong scent, we shall have a chance to make some important personages squirm. Hurry, for mercy's sake! . . ."

"Yes, yes, in a minute. Where did it happen?"

"In that same cursed Hollow, as usual. It ought to be blown up. A driver was killed. . . ."

"What's that? A mail robbed?"

"No, no! — he wasn't a government driver."

"The 'Slayer'?" I exclaimed, as a sudden conviction flashed into my mind.

Proskuróf turned to me, and devoured me with his eyes.

"Precisely! — that was the name the deceased was known by. May I ask what interest you have in this matter?"

"Hm! . . ." muttered Vasíli Ivánovitch, and a roguish look danced in his eyes. "Examine him — you had better; examine him carefully."

"I met him once," I said.

"Just so, . . ." drawled out Vasíli Ivánovitch, "you met him. . . . Might one ask if there was any enmity or rivalry between you, or were you, perhaps, expecting some legacy after his death?"

"I wish you would stop joking. What an insufferable man you are!" rejoined Proskuróf, pettishly, and then, addressing himself to me, he continued: —

"Pardon me, my dear sir! I had no intention of dragging you into this business, but you understand, . . . the interests of justice . . ."

"Of humanity and the safety of mankind," interposed the incorrigible postmaster.

"In short," continued Proskuróf, giving Vasíli Ivánovitch a savage glance, "I was only about to say that, since it is the duty of every citizen to promote the interests of justice, if you can communicate to me any information in regard to this matter, you must perceive that you are under the obligation to do so."

"I don't know," I replied, "how much the information I possess would help the case. I should be very glad if my testimony should prove useful."

"Good! Such promptness does you credit, my dear sir. May I ask with whom I have the honor . . ."

I told him my name.

"Afanásy Ivánovitch Proskuróf," he said in his turn. "You have just spoken of your desire to promote justice. Now, I propose that, in order not to do the thing half-way, you would consent, my dear sir, . . . in a word, . . . would you be willing to go with me now?"

Vasíli Ivánovitch laughed.

"Well, if ever! . . . This beats all! Do you propose to arrest him?"

I made haste to reassure him, telling him that I never for a moment suspected such a thing.

"And Vasíli Ivánovitch is only joking," I added.

"I am glad that you understand me; my time is precious. We shall make but few changes after this, and you will tell me, on the way, all that you know of the matter; and it so happens that I have no clerk with me."

There was no reason why I should refuse.

"I was just on the point myself of asking you to take me along, as I am very much interested in this affair."

The image of the "Slayer" rose before me: his sombre countenance, the lines of agony on his brow, and the brooding anxiety expressed in his eyes. — "He is bringing the cormorants down upon me, the cursed rascal!" My heart sank within me as I recalled his gloomy forebodings. Now these cormorants circle around him, as with closed eyes he lies in the dark

Hollow, that once before cast its ominous shadow over his unsullied life.

"Halloo!" suddenly exclaimed Vasíli Ivánovitch, peering through the window. "Can you tell me, Afanásy Ivánovitch, who that is driving out of the forest?"

Proskuróf threw one hasty glance, and started instantly for the door.

"Come, let us hurry, for goodness' sake!" he called out to me, seizing his hat from the table; and, as soon as I could get ready, I followed him, and found our spirited tróïka just driving up to the entrance.

Glancing in the direction of the forest, I saw a cart rapidly approaching, whose passenger from time to time sprang to his feet, and the alternate rise and fall of his arms indicated some kind of performance from behind the back of the driver. The slanting rays of the setting sun scintillated here and there on his buttons and shoulder-straps. When Proskuróf paid the driver who had brought him, the latter grinned by way of expressing his gratification.

"Many thanks, Your Excellency! . . ."

"Have you told your comrade?—that fellow,

I mean," said Proskuróf, pointing towards the new driver.

"Yes, I have been told," replied the man.

"Then, look out!" said the examining magistrate, as he took his seat in the cart. "If you get us there in an hour and a half, you shall have a ruble; but if you are a minute too late, only one minute too late, you understand! . . ."

The last sentence was not completed; for at this moment the horses started abruptly, and the words were stifled in Proskuróf's throat.

VI.

YEVSÉYITCH.

THE city of B. was some twenty versts distant. At first Proskuróf looked at his watch every instant, reckoning the distance already traversed, and once in a while he glanced over his shoulder; but at last, seemingly satisfied with the pace at which the tróïka was carrying us along, and convinced that no one was following us, he turned to me.

"Well, sir, what do you know about this affair?"

Then I told him about my adventure in the Hollow, and the driver's apprehensions regarding a threat uttered by one of the robbers, whom I suspected to have been the merchant. Proskuróf drank it all in.

"Yes," he said, when I paused, "all this will have its weight. But do you remember the faces of those men?"

"Yes, excepting the merchant's."

Proskuróf gave me one reproachful glance.

"Goodness!" he exclaimed, and his bitter disappointment revealed itself in his voice. "He of all others! Of course, you are not to blame; but he was just the one you ought to have remembered. Too bad! Too bad! However, he will not escape the clutches of the law."

In less than an hour and a half we reached the station. Having given orders to have fresh horses harnessed as soon as possible, Proskuróf sent for the sótsky.*

A small peasant, with a thin beard and

* One of the inferior village authorities. — TR.

roguish eyes, made his appearance. The expression of his face betokened a mixture of good-nature and rascality, but the general impression was favorable and attractive. In his well worn smock-frock and shabby clothes there were no signs of affluence. On entering the hut, he bowed, then looked behind the door, as though to assure himself that there were no eavesdroppers present, and finally approached us. He seemed ill-at-ease, as though he felt himself to be in danger in Proskuróf's presence.

"How goes it, Yevséyitch?" was the cordial greeting of the official. "What news? Your bird hasn't flown?"

"How could he fly?" replied Yevséyitch, shuffling his feet: "he is well guarded."

"Have you tried to talk with him?"

"I have; indeed I have. . . . But he does not seem inclined to talk. I tried politeness, at first; but I must confess I couldn't help threatening him, after a while. 'Why do you behave like a statue, you good-for-nothing fellow? Do you realize who I am?'—'And who are you, I should like to know?'—'An authority, that's

who!—a sótsky!'—'Such authorities as you we have slapped in the face.' What can you do with such a desperate fellow? . . . a villain!"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Proskuróf, impatiently; "be sure and keep a sharp watch over him. I shall return in a short time."

"He won't run away. And I must say, Your Excellency, that he is not troublesome. Most of the time he lies down and looks at the ceiling — whether asleep, or only resting, who can tell? . . . Once he got up and said he was hungry, and I gave him something to eat; then he asked for some tobacco to make a cigarette with, and stretched himself out again."

"So much the better, my dear fellow. I rely on you, and when the surgeon arrives send him along."

"I shall not fail to do so. But I was going to ask Your Excellency . . ."

And once more Yevséyitch went to the door, and looked cautiously around the vestibule.

"Well, what is it?" asked Proskuróf, who was on the point of leaving.

"I suppose we understand the matter," began

Yevséyitch, diplomatically, shuffling his feet, and casting side-glances at me; "if the peasants were to bring some pressure to bear now, it would be all right, would it? . . . the whole mir,* I mean — all our society? . . ."

"Well?" said Proskuróf, inclining his head in order better to grasp the sense of this disconnected explanation of the peasant.

"Just consider, Your Excellency, and think how it must be! We cannot stand this sort of thing much longer. Such trouble! Think of the power they have in their hands, and how successful they are! . . . Now, for instance, take that very same rascal! . . . What is he? There is no doubt but that he was bribed; it must have been done for money. . . . And if he had refused, they would have found another man."

"That's so," said Proskuróf, by way of encouragement, and evidently very much interested. "Go on, my dear fellow; I see you have a head on your shoulders. Well, what then?"

"Nothing; only if we peasants felt that we

* Village commune. — Tr.

had some power behind us, . . . perhaps, then, we might dare to testify against them. . . . Think of their evil doings! . . . and the mir is influential."

"Well, you must know, if you help justice, justice will help you," remarked Proskuróf, with dignity.

"To be sure," ejaculated Yevséyitch, thoughtfully; "but, then, on the other hand, we cannot help thinking that, if Your Excellency should not be able to hold your own with the powers that be, we and our children would be ruined; for the power is in their hands. . . ."

Proskuróf shuddered, as though touched by an electric current, and, hurriedly seizing his hat, he rushed out of the room. I followed him, leaving Yevséyitch in the same perplexed attitude. He continued to gesticulate, muttering to himself, while Proskuróf, indignant, took his seat in the cart.

"That's the way it always is!" he said; "nothing but compromises, whichever way one turns! . . . If success is assured to them, then they will consent to uphold justice. . . . What do you say to that state of things! It is

immoral — simply immoral! . . . It indicates that the sense of duty is deficient. . . ."

"If you ask my opinion, I must beg leave to differ from you. It seems to me that they have the right to demand from the authorities a guaranty of protection in all attempts to obtain justice. If this be denied, then what is the essence of authority? — what meaning does it convey? . . . Do you not think that, if mob-law is forbidden, that very fact implies the assumption of certain responsibilities? And if they are not discharged, then . . ."

Proskuróf turned suddenly toward me, and seemed about to make some remark; but he did not speak, remaining silent, and absorbed in his own thoughts.

We had travelled nearly six miles, and were now about three miles from the Hollow, when we heard the sound of a bell. "Aha!" said Proskuróf, "he has not changed his horses. So much the better; he has had no time to interview the prisoner. I thought as much."

VII.

THE INSPECTOR.

When we reached the Hollow, the roseate disk of the sun was just sinking below the horizon line; but, although the deep evening shadows were already overspreading the place, it was yet daylight. All was cool and still. The "Stone" loomed vaguely through the fog, and above it rose the full, pale moon. The dark forest lay wrapped in the profound sleep of enchantment; not a leaf stirred. The silence was broken only by the sound of the bell, which tinkled clearly in the air, repeated by the reverberating echo of the Hollow, and also behind us the sound of ringing could be faintly heard.

A light smoke rose from the direction of the bushes. The peasant watchers were sitting silently round a fire, and as soon as they saw us they rose, taking off their caps. At a short distance from them, under a linen cover, lay the body.

"Good-evening, boys!" said the examiner, in an undertone.

"Good-evening, Your Excellency!" replied the peasants.

"Nothing has been disturbed?"

"Nothing, we believe. . . . We were obliged to do something to *him*. . . . But we have not touched the animal."

"What animal?"

"Why, didn't you know the brutes shot the sorrel horse? . . . The deceased was returning on one of the side horses." We saw the slain animal lying some thirty sazhén * from the road.

Proskuróf, accompanied by the watchers, went to inspect the locality; he approached the deceased, and raised the covering from his face.

The pallor of death overspread his calm features. His dim eyes, turned upwards toward the evening sky, wore that peculiar expression of bewilderment and inquiry which is sometimes stamped upon the face of the dead by the last emotion of departing life. . . . The face was unsullied by blood.

* A sazhén is about seven feet. — TR.

A quarter of an hour later, Proskuróf passed me; he was walking toward the crossing, accompanied by the peasants. The team that we had heard behind us had just arrived.

A middle-aged man, in police uniform, jumped out, followed by a young person in citizen's dress, who proved to be the surgeon. The inspector seemed much fatigued. His broad chest heaved like a pair of bellows; his portly person, enveloped in a stylish military cloak, swayed to and fro as he moved, and his long, waxed moustache alternately rose and fell, keeping time to his puffing and panting. His long, curling hair, slightly gray, was covered with dust.

"Ouf!" he exclaimed, gasping. "It's hard work to follow you, Afanásy Iványovitch. How do you do?"

"My respects to you," answered Proskuróf. "I am sorry to have hurried you. I could have waited."

"Oh, no! . . . Ouf! . . . Duty above all things. I never want to keep any one waiting. That is against my principles."

The inspector spoke in a hoarse army bass,

the sound of which involuntarily brought to mind the idea of rum and Zhukof* tobacco. His small eyes, colorless yet keen, with restless scrutiny, peered in all directions, and at last rested on me.

"This is Mr. N., a friend of mine, who is temporarily performing the duties of clerk," said Proskuróf, as he introduced me.

"I have the pleasure to have heard of you, and am very happy to make your acquaintance. Bezrýlof, a retired captain."

Lifting his hand to his vizor, he clanked his spurs with a good deal of style.

"Very well! We will begin the investigation, then, while the daylight lasts, and make short work of it, in military fashion. Hey, there! . . ."

The watchers came toward us, and, together, we drew near the dead body. Bezrýlof was the first to reach it, and, with an air of indifference, instantly pulled off the covering.

We involuntarily recoiled at the spectacle before us. The entire chest of the deceased displayed gaping wounds, cut and pierced in

* A poor quality of Russian tobacco. — Tr.

different places. An unspeakable horror took possession of the soul at the sight of such traces of beastly rage. Any one of these wounds would have been mortal, but it was evident that the majority of them were dealt after death.

Even Bezrýlof lost his customary self-possession, and stood motionless, holding in his hand the end of the covering. His cheeks grew purple, and the ends of his moustache stood out like two spears.

"The rascals!" he said at last, and heaved a deep sigh, which may have been an expression of remorse, knowing, as he did, that for him there was no possible retreat from the path of concealment and deception upon which he had entered. Gently replacing the covering, he turned to Proskuróf, who had not once averted his eyes from him.

"If you are willing, I wish to postpone the description until the inquest to-morrow," pleaded the inspector, with a dispirited look. . . . "And now let us examine the locality, and have the body carried to B."

"And there the prisoner shall be questioned," replied Proskuróf, harshly.

A startled expression came into Bezrýlof's eyes, such as is seen in those of a hunted animal.

"The prisoner?" he exclaimed. "Have you a prisoner, then? . . . How happens it that I have not been . . . how is it that I knew nothing of it?"

He was almost ludicrous, but he quickly made an effort to recover himself. Casting a reproachful glance at his driver and the peasants, he turned again to Proskuróf.

"Well done! Matters begin to look alive . . . remarkably so! . . ."

VIII.

"IVÁN, AGED THIRTY-EIGHT YEARS."

ABOUT midnight, the officials, having rested and taken tea, began the inquest.

In a large room, at a table covered with writing materials, sat Proskuróf. His somewhat comical vivacity had given place to a serious and dignified demeanor. Bezrýlof, who had now regained his former ease of the bar-

racks, had had time during his brief rest to get a bath, to wax his moustache, and to give an extra touch to his gray hair. On the whole, he was still a hale and rather an elegant man. Sipping strong tea from a tumbler that stood beside him, he glanced at the examiner in a condescending sort of way. I was seated at the opposite end of the table.

"Will you have the prisoner brought in?" said Proskuróf, looking up from the sheet of paper on which he was rapidly writing the form of the interrogatories.

Bezrýlof nodded, and Yevséyitch at once rushed out of the hut.

A moment later, the door opened, and a man of tall stature — the same whom I had seen with Kostiúshka at the ferry, gazing at the clouds — made his appearance.

In entering, he slightly stumbled over the sill, and, after a glance at the place, he walked into the middle of the room, and stood still. His step was measured and composed. A broad face, with rather coarse but regular features, denoted the utmost indifference. The blue eyes were somewhat dull, and gazed

vaguely into space, as though not noticing the objects before them. His hair was cut in a circle, and spots of blood were visible on his colored cotton shirt. Proskuróf passed the paper with the written interrogatories to me, and, having pushed the pen and ink in the same direction, began to put the usual questions.

"What is your name?"

"Iván, aged thirty-eight."

"Where do you live?"

"I have no home. . . . I am a vagrant. . . ."

"Tell me, 'Iván, aged thirty-eight,' did you murder the driver Iván Mikháïlof?"

"I did. . . . That's my doing, Your Excellency. . . . There's no use trying to hide the fact . . . that's evident. . . ."

"Well said! . . ." exclaimed Bezrýlof, approvingly.

"What is the use? — Your Excellency is making unnecessary delays! . . . There's no denying the truth."

After the first answers had been written down, the examiner continued: —

"At whose instigation or suggestion did you

do this deed, and where did you get the fifty-two rubles and two kopeks which were found on your person?"

The vagrant raised his dreamy eyes.

"What's the use in asking these questions, Your Excellency? You know your business, and I know mine. I did it out of my own head; that's all there is to it. . . . Myself, the dark night, and the forest . . . three of us! . . ."

Bezrýlof gave a grunt of satisfaction and drank half a tumbler of tea at one gulp, bestowing, meanwhile, sarcastic glances on Proskuróf. Then he gazed at the vagrant, admiring the result of his model prison-training, as a discipline-loving officer admires that of a well trained soldier.

Proskuróf remained impassive. Evidently, he had expected no disclosures from the vagrant.

"Will you not tell us," he went on with his interrogatory, "why you hacked Feódor Mikháïlof in such a barbarous manner? Did you have a personal grudge or hatred against the deceased?"

The man looked up at the examiner with astonishment.

"I don't think I stabbed him more than once or twice . . . I believe. . . . Then he fell. . . ."

"Desyátnik," * said Proskuróf to the peasant, "hold a candle so that the prisoner can see, and let him take a look in the next room."

The vagrant, with the same quiet step, moved towards the door, and paused, while the peasant, taking a candle from the table, entered the next room.

The rascal at first shuddered and drew back, but, instantly making an effort at self-control, he glanced once more in the same direction, and crossed over to the opposite side of the room.

As we followed the movements of this powerful man, now crushed and broken, his own excitement communicated itself to us.

He was pale, and for some time stood leaning against the wall, with his eyes cast down. Presently he lifted his head and looked at us with vague and uncertain gaze.

* Village policeman. — Tr.

"Your Excellency! . . . Orthodox Christians! . . ." he began, in a pleading voice, "this is no work of mine. . . . Upon my conscience, I did not do this! . . . Can it be that in my terror I forgot. . . . No, it's impossible! . . ."

Suddenly, his face brightened, and for the first time his eyes sparkled.

He came towards the table, and, in a resolute voice, exclaimed: —

"Set this down, Your Excellency. Kostiúshka did it. . . . Kostínkin with the torn nostril! It must have been he! . . . No one else would have so mangled a human being. That's his work. . . . Mate or no mate, it's all one to me . . . write it down, Your Excellency!"

At this sudden outburst of candor, Proskuróf instantly seized paper and pen, in order to write it himself; while the vagrant, slowly and with visible effort, related to us the details of this gloomy drama.

He had escaped from the prison of N., where he had been confined for vagrancy . . . and for some time remained without "business," until he accidentally met Kostiúshka and his

friends in a certain "establishment." It was there that for the first time he heard them talking of the deceased Mikháïlitch.

"'The Slayer,'" they said, 'is a man who cannot be killed; knife and bullet are powerless against him, because he bears a charmed life.'—'Nonsense, fellows!' I exclaimed; 'that is impossible! A blade will finish any man!'

"'And who are you, may we ask, and where do you belong?'

"'That's my affair,' I replied; 'the prison is my father, and the forest my mother; they are my kith and kin.'

"Gradually, we grew more sociable, and at last I joined the company. They called for half a measure of wine, and Kostínkin said: 'If you are the kind of man we can trust, wouldn't you like to join us and go shares?'—'I would,' I replied.—'All right!' was the answer. 'We want a man like you. This business must be done in the Hollow; it matters not whether it be by day or by night. We have heard that a man is to carry a large sum of money with him from town. But consider! are you sure you are not boasting? If the

gentleman goes with another driver we will share the spoils . . . but if the "Slayer" should be with him, look out that you don't run away.' — 'No danger,' I said; 'that will not happen.' — 'All right! if you feel so confident, you may be in luck; a large reward has been offered for the "Slayer," and you will stand a chance of getting it.' "

"A reward?" repeated Proskuróf; "by whom, may I ask?"

"Look here, sir," replied the vagrant, "you listen to me at present, and keep your questions till by and by. . . . Well, I must acknowledge that, the first time we tried it, I did get frightened, and ran away; the mate was mostly to blame for that. Mikháïlitch had nothing but a whip in his hand when he came towards us; and Kostínkin, with his rifle, was the first to run . . . of course, I felt frightened too. . . . But that rascal was the first one to make fun of me. He is very sarcastic — that Kostínkin! 'Very well,' I said, 'let us try it again. But let me tell you one thing: if you run away this time, I shall kill you too.' For three days we stayed in the Hollow, on the

lookout for him. Toward the evening of the third day he passed us — so we felt sure he would have to return that night. We were all ready, lying in wait, when we heard him coming; he was riding one of the side horses. Kostínkin fired and hit the sorrel horse. Mikháïlitch rushed toward the bushes, just at the very spot where I stood. . . . My heart beat fast, I must confess; for I knew that one of us, either he or I, must fall. . . . So I made a plunge forward and struck at him with the knife, but missed him. Then he, seizing my arm, struck the knife out of my hand and threw me to the ground — almost crushing me, in his great strength. But just as he was about to take off his belt, preparing to bind me, I drew from my boot another knife, which I had made ready for just such a crisis as this; and, bending, I stabbed him under the ribs. . . . He gave one groan, and, turning me face upwards, looked me in the eyes. . . . 'Ah, my instinct warned me! . . . Well, go thy way, but don't torture me. Thou hast killed me.' I got up . . . and saw that he was in agony. . . . He tried to lift himself, but could not.

'Forgive me,' I cried. — 'Go thy way, go thy way! May God forgive thee . . . as I do!' Then I left him, and I tell you the truth when I say that I did not go near him again. . . . This is Kostínkin's work; probably, after I went away, he fell upon him. . . ."

The vagrant was silent, and threw himself on the bench, while Proskuróf hastened to finish his writing. All was still.

"Now," continued the examiner, "complete your frank confession. What merchant was with you on the occasion of the first attack, and in whose name did Kostiúshka promise you a reward for the murder of Feódor Mikháïlof?"

Bezrýlof sat gazing with disappointment at the softened vagrant. But suddenly the latter rose from the bench and resumed his former air of indifference.

"That will do!" he said, firmly; "I shall tell nothing more! . . . Enough! . . . You have put down all that about Kostiúshka, haven't you? It serves him right, and perhaps it will teach him better than to be such a brute in the future! You may as well order

them to take me away, Your Excellency, for I shall say nothing more."

"Listen, 'Iván, aged thirty-eight,'" said the examiner, "I deem it my duty to inform you that the fuller your confession, the more leniency you may expect from the hands of justice. You cannot save your mates."

The vagrant shrugged his shoulders.

"That is not my lookout. It is all the same to me."

Evidently, there was no hope of obtaining any further information from him, and he was removed from the room.

IX.

THE INVESTIGATION CONTINUED.

It still remained to examine the witnesses.

The priest was expected, to administer the oath, and meanwhile they huddled together at the inner wall. The gray crowd, with sombre faces, stood shuffling their feet, in dead silence. Yevséyitch stood in front. His face was red, his lips drawn tightly together, his forehead

wrinkled, and, as he gazed gloomily from under his brows, his eyes rested alternately on Bezrýlof and the examiner. It was evident enough that between this crowd and Yevséyitch a decision had been reached.

Bezrýlof sat on the bench, with his legs spread apart, snapping his fingers. While the peasants were entering and taking their places, he gazed at them attentively and thoughtfully; then, after giving them one cold, disdainful glance, he turned to Proskuróf, nodded, and, with an almost imperceptible smile, exclaimed:

"By the way, Afanásy Ivánovitch, I almost forgot to congratulate you! . . . I have a pleasing bit of news. . . . Excuse me! . . . With all this business . . . it actually slipped my mind. . . ."

"On what subject?" inquired Proskuróf, still reading over the deposition.

Bezrýlof was beaming. "Can it be possible that you have not heard, and am I to be the first to impart this agreeable intelligence! . . . I am very, very glad! . . ."

The examiner raised his eyes and gazed at the inspector, who thereupon came up to him,

clanking his spurs, and smiling in a way meant to be irresistible. "You are temporarily appointed to the place of Treasurer of the City of N. . . . Of course, this is merely a form, and there can be no doubt but that your appointment will be confirmed. I congratulate you, my dear fellow," continued Bezrýlof, in his most cordial and flattering voice, seizing Proskuróf's hand; "I congratulate you with all my heart."

But Proskuróf failed to appreciate these friendly congratulations. Quickly withdrawing his hand, he sprang from his seat.

"Wait, my dear sir, wait!" he hastily exclaimed, almost stuttering as he spoke. "This is no place for joking! . . . no place whatever! . . . Perhaps you think that I do not see through your policy? . . . You are mistaken, my dear sir! I am no calf! . . . no, sir! . . . no calf! . . ."—"God bless you, Afanásy Ivánovitch! what is the matter?" exclaimed Bezrýlof, in surprise, and, with a deprecatory wave of his hand, he glanced round the room, as if summoning those present to contemplate Proskuróf's ingratitude. "Do you think I

should dare to joke on such a subject . . . an official appointment! . . . I read it myself . . . I assure you! . . . And, I must say, a very desirable position it is," he continued, changing his tone, and again assuming one of easy familiarity. "You will have no more trouble with unpleasant cases of this kind, while we, luckless mortals that we are, must finish this one without your assistance. I am sorry, of course! . . . Still, I am delighted for your sake! It's an easy, comfortable office . . . ha-ha-ha! . . . One that exactly . . . ha-ha-ha! . . . suits your temperament. . . . And, moreover, you are likely to receive . . . from the merchants . . . ha-ha-ha! . . . substantial tokens of gratitude. . . ."

Bezrýlof seemed to have abandoned all reserve, and his stout person was convulsed by excessive laughter. Proskuróf stood before him motionless, grasping the table with both hands. His face, which wore an expression of mingled grief and astonishment, lengthened visibly, and grew fairly livid.

Alas, for him! At that moment, he really made one think . . . of a calf.

I glanced at the peasants. They were craning their necks; only Yevséyitch bent his head, as he had the habit of doing, and listened attentively, without losing a syllable. As I felt no further interest in the examination, I went out into the entry, where, on a bench in the corner, sat the prisoner. At a short distance from him stood several of the peasant watchers. As I drew near, and seated myself beside him, he looked up and made room for me.

"Tell me," I said, "is it true that you really felt no enmity against the deceased Mikháïlof?"

He raised his calm blue eyes.

"What did you say!" he asked. "How could I have felt enmity, when I never saw him before!"

"Why did you kill him, then? Surely, it could not have been for the fifty rubles that were found on your person?"—"No, of course not," . . . he replied thoughtfully. "As we live, even ten times that sum hardly lasts a week. I simply wanted to know . . . if it was a possible thing that a knife-blade could have no effect."

"You don't mean to say that you have killed a man and made a wreck of your own life out of mere curiosity!"

He looked at me with surprise.

"Life, did you say? . . . My own life, you mean? . . . What is that? To-day it happens that I have killed Mikháïlitch, but, if things had turned out differently, he might have put an end to me. . . ."

"Oh, no, he would never have killed you!"

"Yes, I think you are right; had he killed me, he would have been alive to-day."

The vagrant gave me a look in which animosity was plainly to be seen.

"Go away! What do you want?" he said; and then added, letting fall his head, "Such is my lot! . . ."

"What is your lot?"

"Such as it is . . . prison life ever since I was a boy."

"Have you no fear of God?"

"God?" . . . he repeated, smiling, and tossed his head. "I squared up my accounts with the Lord a long time ago, and well I might! . . . Considering all my prayers, I

shouldn't wonder if He were still my debtor. Look here, sir!" he said, changing his tone, "those things are not for the like of us. Why do you hound me? Haven't I told you that such is my lot! I can talk pleasantly to you here, but if we happened to meet in the forest, or as we did that time in the Hollow, — then, it would be a very different matter. . . . It is all fate. . . . Heigh-ho!"

He shook his brown locks, exclaiming: —

"Won't you give me some tobacco, sir? I want it badly!" But the light tone in which he spoke seemed to me forced and artificial.

I gave him a cigarette, and, leaving him, went out into the vestibule. Away beyond the forest the sun was just rising; and the night-mist, drifting eastward, rested on the tops of the pines and the cedars. . . . The dew sparkled on the grass, and through the window I could see the yellow flame of the tapers that stood near the head of the corpse.